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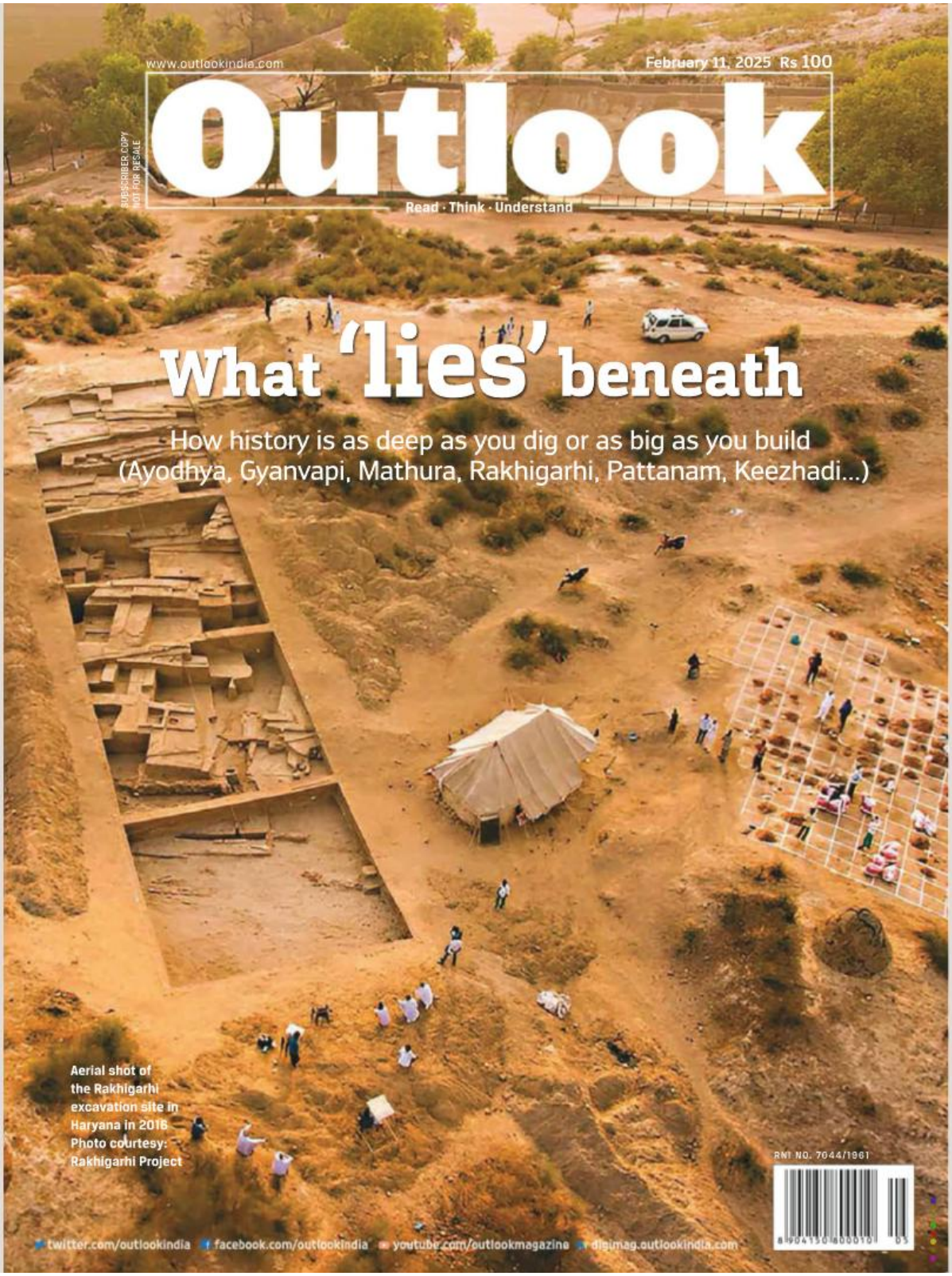
What 'lies' beneath

How history is as deep as you dig or as big as you build
(Ayodhya, Gyanvapi, Mathura, Rakhigarhi, Pattanam, Keezhadi...)



Aerial shot of the Rakhigarhi excavation site in Haryana in 2018
Photo courtesy: Rakhigarhi Project

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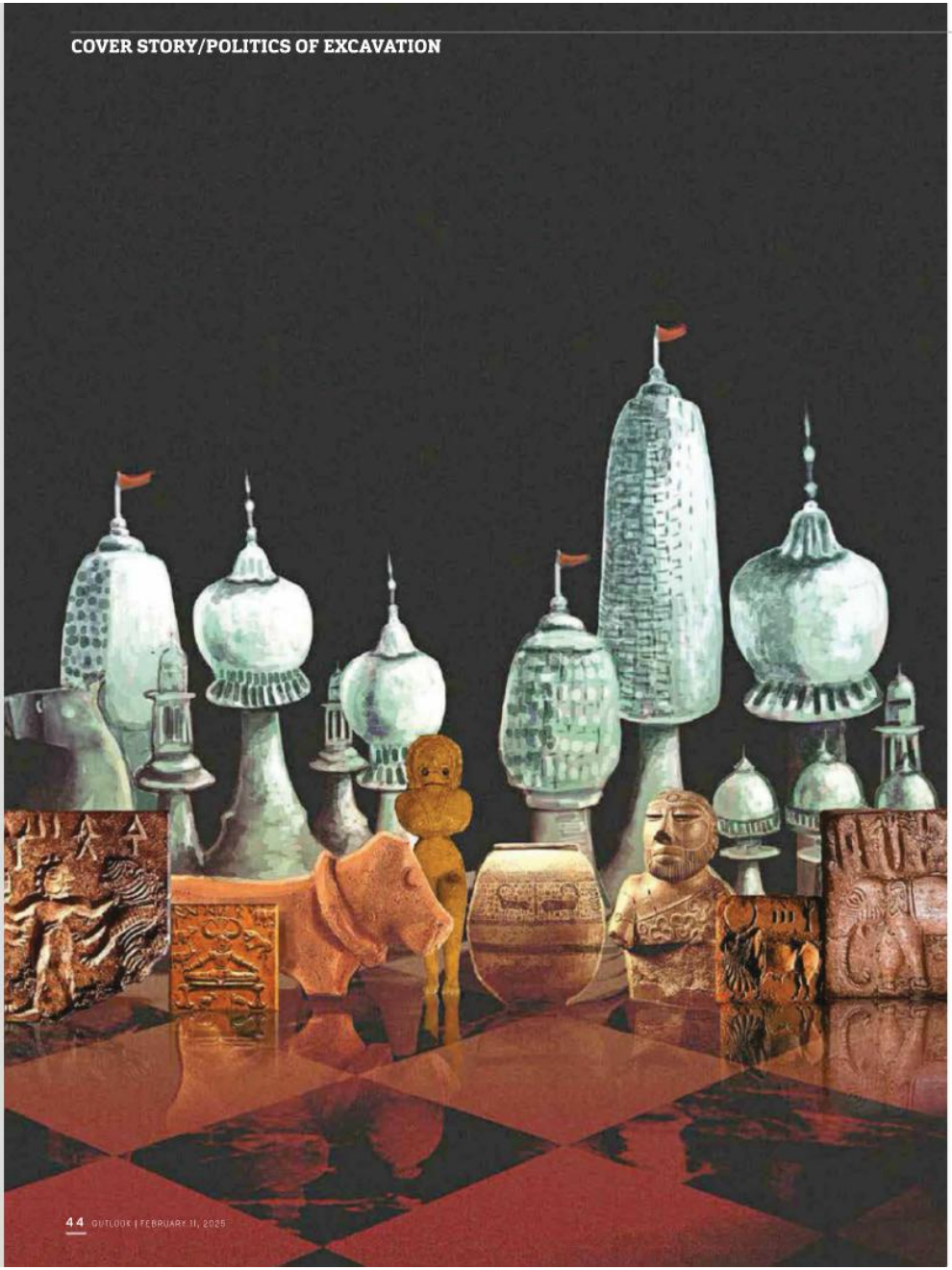


The Harappan Hurdle

Why Hindu nationalists desperately claim Harappa as an Aryan Civilisation

Snigdhendu Bhattacharya

ON September 20, 2024, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. K. Stalin expressed his gratitude to John Marshall, the late British archaeologist who headed the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) when Daya Ram Sahni's excavations in Harappa (1921) and Rakhal Das Banerji's in Mohenjo-daro (1922) led to the discovery of the Indus Valley Civilisation (IVC).

Marshall announced the discoveries in a six-page report published in the *Illustrated London News* on September 20, 1924, drawing global attention. Remembering Marshall a century after the announcement of the discovery of South Asia's oldest civilisation, Stalin wrote in a social media post: "I look back with gratitude and say, thank you, John Marshall. By taking the right cognizance of the material culture of the #IVC, he linked it to the #DravidianStock."

Stalin's mention of Marshall's linking of the Harappan or the IVC with Dravidian culture came roughly a month after India's new class six social science textbook released by the Union government-funded National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) called the Harappan civilisation as Sindhu-Saraswati civilisation. This nomenclature links the Harappan civilisation with settlements in northern India—considered the eastern extension of the Harappan civilisation—where Hindu nationalists claim the Saraswati river valley existed.

On September 20, Stalin also announced that the state government would organise an international conference to mark the centenary of the discovery of the IVC and install a life-size statue of Marshall. Three and a half months later, on January 5, 2025, while inaugurating that international conference in Chennai and laying the foundation stone for Marshall's statue, Stalin took his war against Hindutva historiography to the next level. He announced a $1 million prize for anyone indisputably deciphering the Harappan script.

He sounded certain that the decipherment would confirm the Harappan script's Dravidian connection. "There were bulls in the Indus Valley. Bulls are Dravidian symbols," he said. He released a book, published by the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology (TNSDA), which said that the state's archaeologists compared Indus and Dravidian signs and found that 60 per cent of the graffiti marks have similarities with the Indus script.

The Indus script has remained an enduring mystery, just as the Vedic Saraswati. In his 1924 report, Marshall pointed out that the pictographic script used to inscribe legends on the stone seals was unknown. Besides, "the figures engraved on them, and the style of the engraving, are different from anything of the kind hitherto met with in Indian art".

Marshall noted that the animals engraved on the stone seals are in some instances bulls, in others, unicorns; but neither the Indian (Vedic) humped bull nor the water buffalo occurred

ILLUSTRATION: VIKAS THAKUR

among them. He also pointed out that "the strange pictographs which do duty for letters" bore "no resemblance whatsoever to any ancient Indian alphabet known to us".

While the Harappan script was not linked to any Indian language, the discovery of the civilisation itself displaced the Hindu nationalist pride for the Vedic Sanskritic civilisation. The Sanskrit of the Vedic time had no script, but the Harappans had a script. They knew how to write.

Four months after Marshall's report, in a December 1924 essay titled, *Dravidian Origins and the Beginning of Indian Civilisation*, Suniti Kumar Chatterji, the celebrated linguist, called the Indus Valley's burial customs "distinctly un-Aryan", showing a "deep-rooted difference in racial and cultural origins". He concluded that the Mohenjo-daro and Harappa cultures "did not seem to be Aryan".

Marshall published an elaborate report in 1931 detailing the excavations that took place till 1927. In this book, he concluded that the religious belief of the Harappan people—as emerging from archaeological evidence—was distinctly different from the Vedic culture of the Indo-Aryans. Both Marshall and Chatterji suspected Dravidian links, but were not sure.

These developments around the discovery of the Harappan culture came at a time when India's Hindu nationalists—especially the Hindu Mahasabha and the Annie Besant-led Home Rule League—were propagating Vedic Aryan glory and superiority.

Since William Jones' 1786 proposition that Sanskrit, Persian and European languages had a common ancestor, the broad consensus among linguists was that the Aryans (Indo-Europeans) were speakers of a language that originated in the central Asian steppe region and then migrated to Europe, Iran and India. Following the identification of the Dravidian language group in the 1810s, German Indologist Max Müller declared in 1847 that the common ancestor of Sanskrit and European languages originated in the Caucasian range, while the Dravidian languages are indigenous to India.

The likes of Maharashtra's Jyotirao Phule, Bhimrao Ambedkar and Tamil Nadu's Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy Periyar had also been hammering at the Vedic Aryanism of the Hindu nationalists—charging it with being Brahminic and caste-oppressive—when Harappa's pre-Vedic excellence emboldened the Dravidian claims against Vedic Aryan glory.

Harappa was an urban civilisation, while the Vedic was rural. The Vedic culture had a predominance of religion and male deities; Harappa had very few relics of a religious nature and, those suspected to be a deity, were mainly female figures. The Vedic-Aryan culture was intrinsically linked to horses, but the Harappan findings had no trace of any horses.

Since then, Hindu nationalists have been trying to connect the Harappan culture with the Vedic civilisation. This initiative found a new impetus when the 1947 Partition of India resulted in the Harappa and Mohenjo-daro sites falling in Pakistan. The loss of the most precious archaeological sites resulted in the ASI setting its focus on more excavations on the Indian side adjacent to the Harappan civilisation.

This led to the discovery of Harappan sites in western India's Lothal (Gujarat), Dholavira (Gujarat), Kalibagnan (Rajasthan) and north India's Alamgirpur (Uttar Pradesh) during the 1950s and the 1960s. Some of the archaeologists leading such projects had Hindu nationalist leanings. For example, Bal Krishen Thapar and Braj Basi Lal were leading figures of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)-backed Indian Archaeological Society, founded in 1967.

Citing the presence of Harappan sites significantly away from the Indus Valley region, archaeologist Lal proposed in 1964 that the Indus Valley Civilisation should be renamed as the Indus-Saraswati or Sindhu-Saraswati civilisation. This was under the assumption that the Indian side of the civilisation developed on the banks of the Saraswati.

The Saraswati's existence has been controversial. All the mighty rivers mentioned in the Vedas exist till date, except the Saraswati. The Saraswati was actually described as the mightiest of them all—flowing from the Himalayas to the Arabian Sea. But neither has later literature mentioned it, nor has its past existence (paleochannels) been conclusively traced. This is why a section of historians considered the Saraswati in the Vedas to have been used metaphorically. But Lal was convinced that the dry paleochannels of north India's Ghaggar and Pakistan's Hakra—a 19th century speculation—represented the Vedic Saraswati.

Later, Lal and several other archaeologists involved with the excavations of such sites—Thapar, S R Rao and R S Bisht—tried to establish other connections between the Harappan and Vedic cultures. All of them have been closely associated with the Hindu nationalist camp. Lal and Thapar identified some structures in these sites as fire altars—connecting the practice with Vedic *yajnas*.

In a 1992 book, published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), titled, *History of Civilizations of Central Asia, V. 1: The Dawn of Civilization, Earliest Times to 700 B.C.*, A. H. Dani and B. K. Thapar wrote that Harappa is "usually identified with Hariyupiya of the Rigveda". The use of the word 'usually' is curious, as such linking was, indeed, rare.

HARAPPA WAS AN URBAN CIVILISATION, WHILE THE VEDIC WAS RURAL. THE VEDIC-ARYAN CULTURE WAS INTRINSICALLY LINKED TO HORSES, BUT THE HARAPPAN FINDINGS HAD NO TRACE OF ANY HORSES.

THE SARASWATI MENTIONED IN THE VEDAS WAS A PERENNIAL, HIMALAYA-BORN, SNOW-FED, MIGHTY RIVER, WHEREAS GHAGGAR AND HAKRA ARE RAIN-FED RIVERS HAVING NO GLACIAL LINKS.

The greatest thrust, however, has been laid in proving the past existence of the Saraswati. The speculation that the dry channels of Ghaggar and Hakra represent the Saraswati always remained contested, as the Saraswati mentioned in the Vedas was a perennial, Himalaya-born, snow-fed, mighty river, whereas Ghaggar and Hakra are rain-fed rivers having no glacial links.

In 1985, the Akhil Bharatiya Itihas Sankalan Yojana (ABISY), the history wing of the RSS, launched a Saraswati Nadi Shodh Abhiyan (research campaign) under the leadership of archaeologist V. S. Wakankar. In 1997, ABISY's Saraswati Nadi Shodh Prakalp was founded in Chennai, the heartland of Dravidian politics. In 1999, after the Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government came to power, the Saraswati Nadi Shodh Sansthan was founded in Haryana, a heartland of Vedic culture.

The same year, the Geological Society of India, which was then allegedly under the influence of Hindu nationalists, published a book titled, *Vedic Sarasvati-Evolutionary History of a Lost River of Northwestern India*. The essays it contained linked the Harappan civilisation with the Vedic culture through the Saraswati. An essay by Wakankar—who also served in different RSS organisations in leadership roles—said that "the upper Saraswati region forms the nucleus of human evolution".

In response, historian Irfan Habib charged the 1999 book—including Wakankar's essay—with peddling speculation. In a 2001 paper titled, *Imagining River Sarasvati—A Defence Of Commonsense*, Habib pointed out that Wakankar's assumption—of the 'upper Saraswati' or Haryana to be the nucleus of human civilisation—was based on the finding of a fossil-ape (Ramapithecus) in the Siwaliks, whereas Ramapithecus "is not in the line of hominids but of the orangutan!"

Habib, along with Leftist historians and archaeologists like Romila Thapar and Shereen Ratnagar, have questioned the identification/interpretations of Harappan fire hearths from Lothal and Kalibagnan as Vedic fire altars. "Two such doubtful 'sacrificial' altars in the whole Indus civilization are certainly too few either for propounding the existence of an ox-slaughter cult or for claiming Vedic affinities on its basis," Habib wrote in his 2002 book, *The Indus Civilisation*.

The Hindu nationalist initiatives on the Saraswati had a temporary setback after the Vajpayee government lost power in 2004, but they revived soon after Narendra Modi's NDA government took charge in 2014. Since then, multiple government-funded organisations, including the ASI and the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), have been deeply engaged in Saraswati research.

Over the past few years, excavations at several Harappan sites in India—especially Rakhigarhi in Haryana and Sinauli in Uttar Pradesh—have resulted in archaeologists declaring that the findings conclusively proved that the Aryans were indigenous to India and that Harappan culture was a Vedic one. The claims have largely remained disputed. For example, in Uttar Pradesh's Sinauli, what the ASI archaeologists claimed to be a chariot—linking the Harappan site with the Vedic Aryans—has been dubbed by others as merely a wheeled cart.

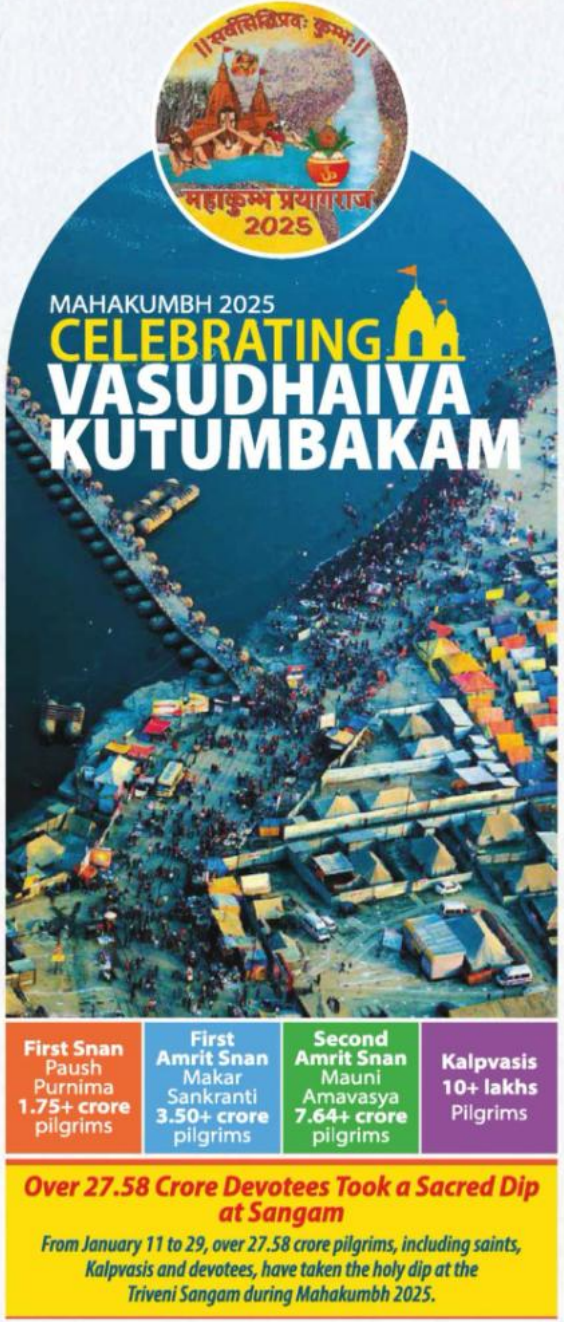
While some scientists associated with government-funded institutions have claimed that they have found evidence of a glacial-fed river along the Ghaggar-Hakra paleochannels—proving Saraswati's existence—other studies said the glacial deposits were more than 9,000 years old and the river was dry even much before the Harappan civilisation was born.

Meanwhile, a Dravidian challenge to the Vedic claim on Harappa rose from the south. One of the strongest arguments in favour of a Dravidian link was that speakers of a Dravidian language, Brahui, have been living in the vicinity of the Indus sites for many centuries. However, the huge geographical gap between the Dravidian heartland in southern India and the Harappan sites raised questions about any possible link. Besides, no such ancient urban settlements of Harappan antiquity had been excavated in the Dravidian states.

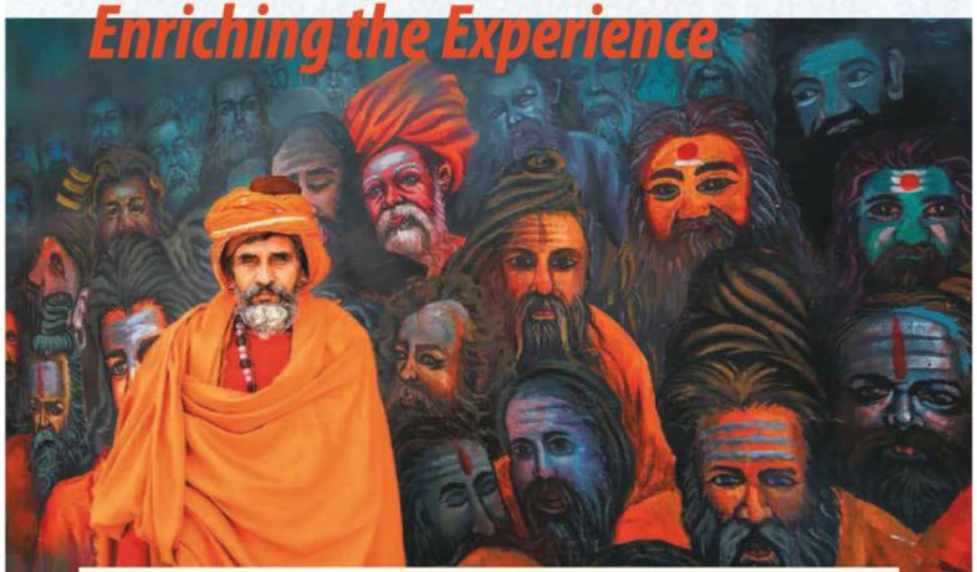
After the Keezhadi (Keeladi) excavations in Tamil Nadu during 2015-16, its lead excavator, archaeologist K. Amarnath Ramakrishna of the ASI, told the media that the findings hint at a civilisation parallel to the Harappan. The Keezhadi excavation turned into a political tussle, with the Modi government transferring Ramakrishna, and the Tamil Nadu government approaching the court to allow the state archaeology department to take over the excavations—a battle it finally won.

In September 2021, within months of coming to power, Stalin told the state assembly, "It is the task of the government to scientifically prove that the history of the Indian subcontinent should begin from the Tamil landscape." Since then, his government has backed the state archaeological department in tracing Harappan links to ancient cultures unearthed in Tamil Nadu. The latest TNSDA book, which Stalin released in January 2025, was a product of that initiative.

However, within a fortnight of Stalin's $1 million prize announcement, the ASI team excavating the Harappan site of Rakhigarhi claimed to have unearthed more proof of the Saraswati. ASI archaeologist Sanjay Manjul—also the main figure behind the Sinauli chariot claim—told the media that a reservoir that they unearthed that month was linked to the drying of Drishadvati, a tributary of the Vedic Saraswati.



Poster City Prayagraj
Beautifying the City, Enriching the Experience



Anticipating millions of visitors during the Mahakumbh 2025, the Prayagraj Mela Authority reimagined the city's ambiance with the 'Paint My City' initiative. This ambitious project aimed to adorn over two million square feet of walls with vibrant artwork, spreading messages of harmony, cultural pride and sustainability. By engaging professional art agencies, student volunteers and the community, the city transformed into a living gallery of heritage and modernity.

With themes reflecting the city's historical, spiritual, and cultural legacy, the project gained overwhelming public support. Locals eagerly participated, offering food to artists and admiring the progress. The stunning murals became selfie spots and social media sensations, drawing tourists and locals. Funded by government initiatives like Namami Gange and Swachh Bharat Mission, Paint My City showcased meticulous planning and execution, turning Prayagraj into a vibrant and inspiring "Poster City."

100+ murals and street art installations

500+ buildings and walls transformed

1000+ artists and volunteers unite

To Dig or Not to Dig

On the legal turf, the battle is between findings of the ASI vs creative inferences that creep in depending on the politics of the day

Saiyyad Mohammad Nizamuddin Pasha
IS A DELHI-BASED LAWYER

IS archaeology an art or a science? How much of the findings of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) from an excavation is factual and how much of it is subjective inference drawn from data? Can the credibility and integrity of the ASI as a body be doubted by the court? These were some of the questions the Supreme Court grappled with in the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute.

Civil suits claiming the site of the Babri Masjid was Lord Ram's birthplace had been pending since 1949, when some miscreants had installed idols of Lord Ram in the masjid in the middle of the night and the premises was sealed the next morning by the District Administration. The Babri Masjid was demolished by the right-wing Hindutva forces in December 1992. The Supreme Court gave its final verdict in 2019, deciding the dispute in favour of the Hindu side.

Under the Indian Evidence Act (now Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam), the opinions of experts in the fields of foreign law, science, art, handwriting or fingerprint analysis can be relied upon by a court. Holding an ASI report to be in the nature of "expert evidence" under the Indian Evidence Act, the Supreme Court said that the weight to be ascribed to the evidence of an expert is to be decided on the nature of the science on which it is based. The Court, in its final judgement, deliberated on whether archaeology could be considered a 'science' and finally answered these questions by concluding: *"The supposed distinction between science as embodying absolute truth and archaeology as unguided subjectivity is one of degree not of universes. Yet, as in other disciplines of its genre, archaeology is as much a matter of process as it is of deduction. The archaeologist must deal with recoveries as much as the 'finds' from them. Interpretation is its heart, if not its soul. Interpretations do vary and experts disagree. When the law perceives an exercise of interpretation it must recognise margins of error and differences of opinion. Archaeological findings are susceptible to multiple interpretations."*

Thus, what emerged is that while it remains open to the parties to challenge the findings of the ASI by bringing expert evidence to counter its conclusions or by cross-examining the ASI officials who prepare the report on the process of arriving at their conclusions, the findings of the ASI can be relied upon by a court *"so long as we understand the limits and boundaries of the discipline"*.

The Allahabad High Court, while directing the survey of the disputed site in Ayodhya by the ASI, had asked it to ensure that there was equal representation of both Hindu and Muslim communities in the constitution of the ASI team and the labour deputed at the site.

It is important to note that the court did not overlook the fact that the ASI was, after all, a body of individuals, and in a charged and divided atmosphere in a dispute involving two religious communities, the fact that these individuals were from one or the other of the two communities would affect the perception of objectivity of the final opinion by the disputing parties.

The ASI excavation was, in fact, carried out in the presence of two serving judges of the district judiciary as court observers, one Hindu and one Muslim. During the survey, though, objections were raised by the Muslim side that despite court directions, the proportion of Muslims in the ASI team and the labourers engaged by them remained minuscule and this reflected in their work. The head of the ASI team conducting the excavation was accused by the Muslim side of bias and was, in fact, replaced by the court, although he remained involved in the preparation of the report. The fact that the ASI's report found its way into the media even before being filed in court was also made one of the grounds for suggesting that the ASI acted with an agenda.

The Supreme Court gave the ASI a glowing clean chit from any kind of bias. Oddly, the fact that the ASI *"is an*

HAVE WE LEARNT ANYTHING FROM OUR MISTAKES? OF COURSE NOT. ASI SURVEYS ARE BEING SOUGHT BY PARTIES IN SEVERAL OF THE CIVIL SUITS THAT HAVE CROPPED UP ACROSS THE COUNTRY.

organization under the Government of India and satisfies all the requisites to be termed as a 'Department of the Central Government'" was used by Justice Sudhir Aggarwal of the Allahabad High Court as the basis for considering its objectivity and integrity to be beyond question.

The opinion of Justice Aggarwal was endorsed by the Supreme Court and the ASI was held to be "beyond reproach". At a time when much criticism has been directed at the institutional compromise in the face of majoritarian governments, the fact that the ASI was considered beyond reproach because it is controlled by the Central Government does not inspire confidence.

Some of the flights of fantasy defying logic that were found in the ASI report were rejected even by the Supreme Court in the Ayodhya judgement, though it, by and large, reposed faith in the ASI's findings. For instance, fragments of a figurine found in the excavation consisting of only a "waist, thigh and foot" were described by the ASI as a "sculpture of divine couple seated in *alinganamudra*", an inference that the court agreed certainly did not follow from the fragment discovered.

It was also alleged by the Muslim side that the ASI selectively examined evidence discovered during the excavation, and the bones discovered at the site were neither analysed by the ASI nor explained in its report.

Justice Dharam Veer Sharma of the Allahabad High Court, writing about this objection of the Muslim side, said that this could be explained as "The Lords of Ram (sic) Himself used to hunt". He also floated some theories by way of explanation that make for an interesting read including "saints, cows, parrots etc. attached to a temple are buried in temple compound". The Supreme Court, however, dismissed these objections, saying *"the deficiency is not sufficient to discredit the report in its entirety"*.

After a detailed analysis of the long and technical report submitted by the ASI, the Supreme Court accepted the findings of the ASI that in the layers of soil underlying the now-demolished mosque, there was evidence of religious structures having existed in an earlier period, in particular a circular shrine that existed in the 7th to 9th century AD and a more recent structure immediately underlying the Babri Masjid that had been built over this circular shrine around the 12th century. However, the precise question that had been referred to the ASI was whether any temple or structure had been demolished and a mosque constructed over it. This question the ASI had been unable to answer as it had found no evidence of how the first shrine got buried in the ground and how the 12th century structure that replaced it came to be destroyed.

Finally, after months spent on the excavation, years spent debating the 'findings' that emerged from the excavation, the public sensation and media frenzy that it all generated and a small rainforest that died to generate the paper all this consumed, the Supreme Court, in its conclusion on the relevance of this entire exercise, held that *"A finding of title cannot be based in law on the archaeological findings which have been arrived at by ASI"*.

Why then, was the entire exercise undertaken? What value did it add to know what lay buried in the layers of soil under the now-demolished masjid and what period it dated back to? These are the questions that we are left grappling with at the end of that saga.

But have we learnt anything from our mistakes? Of course not. ASI surveys are being sought by parties in several of the civil suits that have cropped up across the country in the aftermath of the Ayodhya judgement, claiming that several ancient mosques and *dargahs* had been built on the site of pre-existing temples and ought to be restored to their original religious character. Such requests for ASI surveys are being allowed by courts as a matter of course.

For instance, Hindutva supporters have filed claims that a Shiva temple existed where the present Gyanvapi mosque is situated in Varanasi, and, as in Ayodhya, want the temple restored. In these civil suits, the court ordered the Director of the ASI to conduct a "scientific investigation/survey/excavation" of the present structure to "find out as to whether same has been constructed over a pre-existing structure of Hindu temple".

In sharp contrast to Ayodhya, this time in the Gyanvapi case, there has been no conversation about the constitution of the ASI team and the need for presence of the Muslims on it, perhaps thanks to the clean chit given to the ASI by the Supreme Court. The ASI has now submitted a report before the District Court in the Gyanvapi case. Reading the ASI report leaves one with a strange sense of déjà vu. An entire exercise of excavation and archaeological analysis being demanded and contested, undertaken, its findings leaked to the press contrary to court orders, its conclusions being objected to, and every step being hotly debated in the media, all this leaving the question of its relevance to the legal dispute before the court for the very end, an end that does not appear to be in sight.

(Views expressed are personal)

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Fatherland, Holyland, Motherland

New genetic research on skeletal remains from Rakhigarhi site is being used to negate Aryan migration theory and prove that Harappans were indigenous to the subcontinent

COURTESY: RAKHIGARHI PROJECT

Digging the Past
A file photo of excavation at Mound No. VII, Rakhigarhi

Shweta Desai

IN the chilly Delhi winter of 2008, scholars of Indic ideology gathered in the hallowed halls of the India International Centre for a major conference on the origins of the Saraswati River. This mystical and mythical river, along with the Ganga and Yamuna, forms the holy trinity considered to be the cosmic core of Hindu civilisation.

Unlike the Ganga and Yamuna, which flow through numerous streams and tributaries in northern India, the Saraswati has vanished, leaving little trace of its origins. However, its existence is central to the belief of Hindu nationalists that Vedic culture is deeply rooted in the advanced Indus Valley Civilisation (IVC), which is said to have thrived for millennia along the banks of the Saraswati River.

At the two-day conference, scholars from disciplines such as archaeology, geology, history, seismology and life sciences presented papers building on discoveries made over the last century. These findings, they claimed, proved beyond doubt that Hindu civilisation was ancient, indigenous to the subcontinent and emerged along the banks of the Saraswati River.

The conference put forth a hypothesis that the ancient IVC developed on the banks of the Saraswati, not the Indus River. It suggested that this group of people gave birth to Vedic culture, which appears to be the precursor to the existing Hindu civilisation. Most significantly, it sought to debunk the widely accepted Aryan Invasion Theory, calling it imaginary and negating the idea of any large-scale migration of peoples into India. The Aryan Invasion Theory, propounded in the 1940s by British archaeologist William Mortimer Wheeler, posits that a group of Indo-European-speaking nomadic peoples from the Central Asian steppes, known as the Aryans, migrated to the Indian subcontinent around 1200 BCE, invading or replacing the IVC.

S. Kalyanraman, a prominent Indic scholar, was convinced that the papers and scholarly discussions at the conference dispelled lingering doubts, affirming that the Saraswati was not merely a mythological river. He hoped the new research would persuade proponents of the "Aryan Invasion" colonial myth to reconsider their stance.

However, without irrefutable archaeological and scientific evidence regarding the dating sequence of the IVC and Vedic periods, the hypothesis failed to gain significant news traction. The IVC is believed to have started declining around 1900 BCE, gradually being replaced by the Aryan people. The Aryans are thought to have introduced domesticated horses, the Sanskrit language and new customs of worship and culture, establishing the Vedic civilisation. The oldest record of the Vedic period, the Rig Veda, is dated to around 1500 BCE. This leaves a gap of 700 years between the end of the Harappan era and the arrival of the Aryans.

Cut to 2019, at the start of Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi's second term, two research papers published in the prestigious scientific journals *Cell* and *Science* on the genetic origins of the people living in the Indus Valley during the IVC caused a media sensation and sparked feverish excitement. Mainstream news outlets reported that their findings rejected the Aryan migration theory. The new research, in essence, revisited the controversial claims surrounding the existence of the Saraswati civilisation.

The *Science* paper, co-authored by 117 scholars, analysed genome-wide data from 523 individuals across Central Asia and northernmost South Asia. It revealed that the primary source of ancestry in modern South Asians is a prehistoric genetic gradient between early hunter-gatherers of Iran and Southeast Asia. The research published in *Cell*, authored by 28 scholars, analysed DNA from skeletal remains at Rakhigarhi, Haryana—one of the largest IVC sites. It supported the *Science* paper's findings, showing that the Harappan people "did not have ancestry from Steppe pastoralists or Anatolian and Iranian farmers," suggesting farming in South Asia arose from local foragers rather than large-scale migrations from the West.

Both papers established that Steppe ancestry arrived after 2000 BCE and mixed with other groups to form the present-

day ancestry of modern Indian populations.

A 2009 study by scientists from the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology (CCMB), Hyderabad, Harvard and MIT also supported the large-scale migration theory. It found that nearly all Indian groups descend from a mix of Ancestral North Indians (ANI), related to western Eurasians and Ancestral South Indians (ASI), derived from Southern Asia's hunter-gatherer populations.

The absence of Steppe genetics in the IVC period before 2000 BCE, archaeologist Vasant Shinde, lead author of the *Cell* paper, claimed, showed that Harappa had "an indigenous population, untouched by outside migration, which shows continuity till modern times." Shinde suggested that the Harappan period was synonymous with the Vedic period, citing archaeological, genetic and cultural evidence.

"Harappans and Vedic people were the same," Shinde says. "This is because Harappan remains are found in the Sapta Sindhu region inhabited by Vedic people and references to the Saraswati river further support this. Present-day traditions, culture and crafts in Rakhigarhi strongly resemble Harappan culture."

A contentious issue, however, remains the origins of Sanskrit, an Indo-European language believed to have been introduced by the Steppe pastoralists. Shinde suggested Sanskrit might have been developed locally and spread to the Steppe regions through outward migration from the IVC. "This hypothesis needs further research, but we're finding indications," he added.

Shinde's emphasis on Harappan indigeneity and his interpretation of DNA research challenging the Aryan migration theory, sparked criticism from historians, archaeologists and academics who accused him of advancing a politically motivated Hindutva narrative.

Several historians noted that the *Cell* and *Science* papers state that the Steppe pastoralist ancestary is widespread among Indian populations. These findings are corroborated by the Aryan migration theory which posits that the Steppe pastoralists arrived from the central Asian Steppe after the decline of the Harappan Civilisation.

Critics also pointed to contradictions between the Vedic and Harappan eras. The Rig Veda, for instance, mentions horses (*asva*) over 170 times, yet skeletal remains of horses are absent in the Harappan archaeological record. Similarly, the Rig Veda describes pastoral settlements, while the IVC was marked by advanced urban centres like Harappa and Mohenjodaro, which housed populations of up to 80,000 with highly organised civic infrastructure.

Astronomer Mayank Vahia emphasised that "Vedic evidence is entirely literary, whereas Harappan evidence is entirely archaeological. Reconciling these two periods is impossible," he said.

Genetic and astronomical data continue to support the idea that Vedic people migrated from Central Asia, Vahia added. Bal Gangadhar Tilak's *Orion: The Antiquity of the Vedas* (1893) and *The Arctic Home in the Vedas* (1903) theorised that Rigvedic people originated in far northern Central Asia, based on descriptions of prolonged sunlight absence, suggesting habitation near the Arctic Circle, which a lot of new data suggests could be a likely possibility.

THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND TRAINING HAS PROPOSED INCLUDING THE RAKHIGARHI DNA FINDINGS IN CLASS 12 HISTORY BOOKS.

In post-independent India, these theories were dismissed by M.S. Golwalkar, the second Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief, who asserted that Aryans were indigenous to Hindustan. Golwalkar urged rewriting history to counter "misconceptions" and "distortions."

Shinde said his DNA research was inspired by a desire to refute foreign scholars' theories, proving that the Harappans were indigenous people responsible for agriculture and urbanisation in South Asia. "This culture evolved and transformed but continues to this day," he said.

The *Cell* paper's interpretation gained traction among Hindu revisionists, who view DNA analysis as a crucial piece of the puzzle in affirming the homeland of native Hindus. The BJP-led central government has endorsed the notion that Harappans were indigenous, rejecting Aryan migration. Ideologically the BJP and its parent organisation RSS share the indelible belief that Hindu's have lived in the sub-continent for thousands of years before they were invaded by marauding foreign invaders. It further strengthens the core belief that India is a country of Hindus, while Muslims and Christians are foreigners.

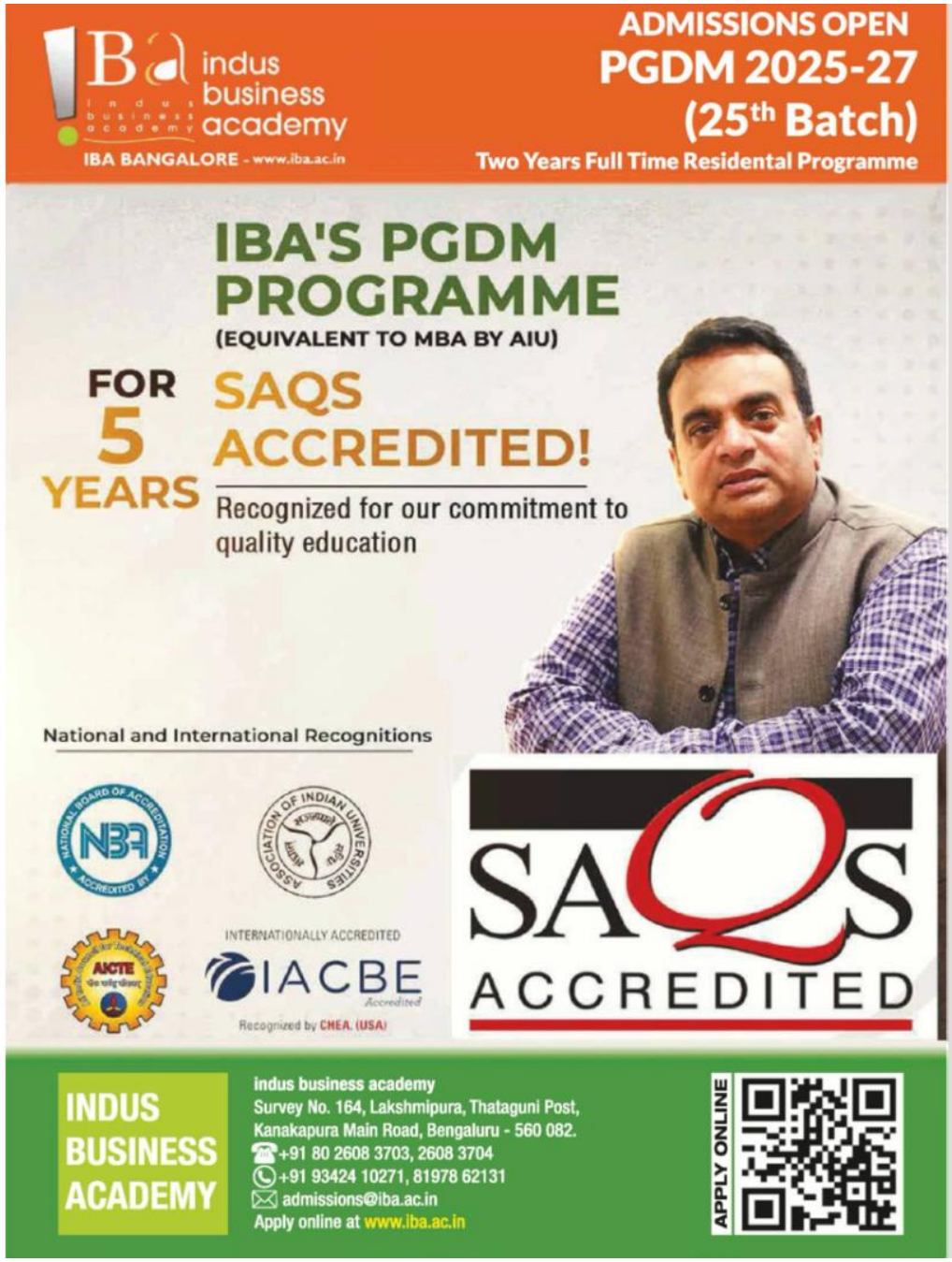
In this vein, the Union Ministry of Culture established a 16-member committee, led by veteran Vedic scholar KN Dixit, to study Indian culture's evolution over 12,000 years. Findings from this study will be incorporated into school textbooks in place of previous cultural interpretations.

The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) has already proposed including the Rakhigarhi DNA findings in the Class 12 history syllabus.

"Our scholars have demonstrated through DNA analysis that Aryans were native to India," says Balmukund Pandey, head of the RSS's Akhil Bharatiya Itihas Sankalan Yojana. "The Aryan invasion theory was a colonial falsehood meant to divide Indians. We must now foster a sense of pride in our indigenous history."

The RSS's history wing, supported by 5,000 historians, plans to rewrite history books and promote projects like the Indian Council of Historical Research's Comprehensive History of Bharat with revisions based on DNA analysis.

"Our objective is to make Indians feel proud of their history. Foreigners came here and distorted our history to colonise us. This will not happen again as we are a free country and our historians have freedom," Pandey concluded.



The Lost City

While the Harappan remains at Rakhigarhi await their much-deserved preservation, the elusive truth of this millennia-old civilisation continues to be shrouded in mystery

Apeksha Priyadarshini at Rakhigarhi

ALL is quiet at Ancient Mound No. I (RGR-I), in Rakhigarhi, Haryana, as a handful of people laze in the winter sun nearby. A couple of workers are laboriously covering the recently concluded excavation at the site, as a precautionary measure to the predicted rainfall. In a humble temporary structure, built close to the mound, lie the skeletal remains of a nearly 4,000-year-old man.

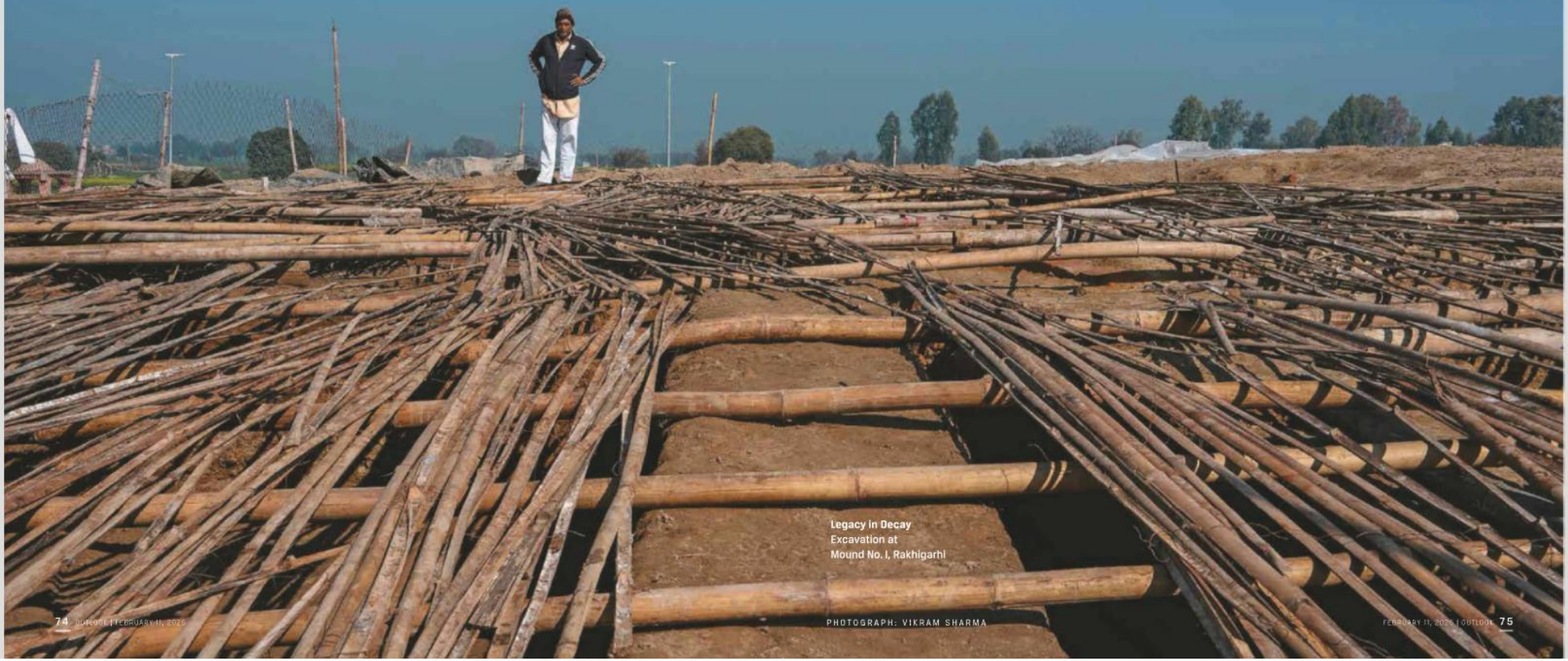
Embedded in a chunk of soil, the skeleton has been unceremoniously dumped at the back of the room, with a bunch of other excavated goods. *"Ye uss time ka ladaku jawan tha. Shayad sena me bharti tha,"* Dharampal, a local villager explains. This deduction, he says, has been made due to the cut marks found in the skull. The skeleton was excavated from Mound No. VII, assumed to be a burial site of the Harappan people. Broken remains of pots of various sizes were found buried near the skeleton. "People of those times buried the belongings of the dead alongside their bodies," he says.

Dharampal has been a part of the Archaeological Survey of India's excavations at Rakhigarhi, Haryana, since 1997. Locals like him are recruited informally by the ASI to assist with the excavations, due to their knowledge about the area. Dharampal proudly claims that he was trained in excavation procedures under the personal supervision of Amarendra Nath himself. Nath, who led the Rakhigarhi excavations between 1997 and 2000, was the then Director of the Institute of Archaeology under ASI. He was the first to carry out extensive excavations at one of the only two cities of the Indus Valley civilisation, which are located within present-day India and one of the five largest known sites of the period.

Even though the ASI identified Rakhigarhi as a Harappan civilisation site as early as 1963, little effort was made before Nath to publish any significant findings from the area. In 2015, Nath was sent to jail for fraud by a special CBI court for fabricating bills and misappropriating ASI money during the Rakhigarhi excavation process. This CBI investigation had led to a decade-long hiatus in continuing the dig in the area between 2000 and 2011.

Peculiar controversies such as this one abound at Rakhigarhi. Mound No. III (RGR-III), the only site currently open to full public view, has also been an enigma for the archaeologists. When the digging began, discovering a host of skeletons excited the people working here about what they were about to uncover. However, it turned out to be a more recent graveyard of the Muslim villagers. Eventually though, as the digging continued, rooms and a bathing area began to emerge from underneath this graveyard, revealing houses from the ancient civilisation. While the rooms are built with uniformly-sized bricks, there is evidence of a well and a well-developed drainage system.

According to Dharampal, there was contestation over the Mound No. III site as the Muslims from the Rakhigarhi village



Legacy in Decay
Excavation at Mound No. I, Rakhigarhi

PHOTOGRAPH: VIKRAM SHARMA

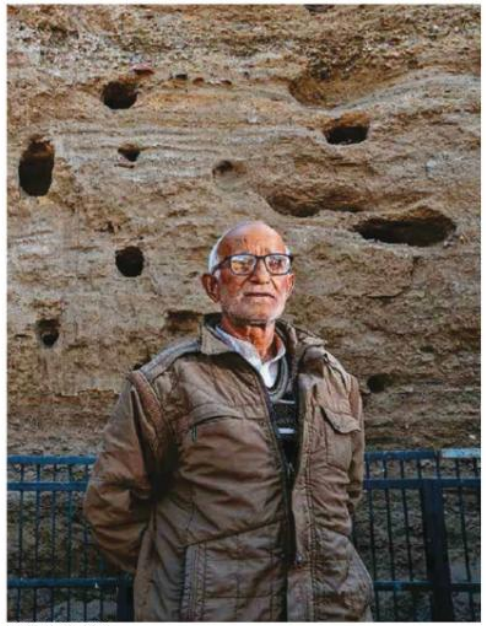
needed a piece of land for burial. Eventually, the ASI allowed them to continue burying their dead in the area close to the mound. The graveyard now lies behind a bright blue structure next to the excavation. The structure, which Dharampal claims is a *mazaar*, is intriguingly covered with religious symbolism of both Muslims and Hindus. Similarly, Mound No. II (RGR-II), which was the first mound to be excavated by the ASI, was named after Mound No. I because of controversies over the area's acquisition between the ASI and the villagers.

Mound No. III is the only site which is covered with a properly-built shed, to protect its findings from being destroyed by harsh weather conditions. Mound No. I and II have no such protection. The area near Mound No. II is lined with cow dung cakes as the space is still utilised by the villagers for their daily needs. Mound No. IV—from where sample collections have been dated to pre-Harappan period—has been cut through to build a lane for the village. While the Rakhi Khas village exists atop this mound, the Rakhi Shahpur village has been built across this lane. As Dharampal points to the layers of history buried beneath the soil in Mound No. IV, the mound ironically serves as a comfortable dwelling for pigeons at present. Meanwhile, Mound No. V, VI and VII continue to lie under the village houses and fields. When asked why the areas have not been acquired and the villagers rehabilitated yet, Dharampal says: "The government will move them as and when the excavation will begin on these mounds. For now, the ASI demarcates a trench in the area they need to dig on these mounds, and the villagers are compensated if they incur any loss of crops or homes."

The excavations are carried out annually for around 3-4 months during winters at the Rakhigarhi sites. However, the dig this year concluded by mid-January itself. Dharampal says that in this year's cycle, he was told, the funding allocated for excavations at Rakhigarhi had reduced. This is a strange revelation. The keenness displayed by bodies such as National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) in adding the findings from the site to school textbooks, somehow, does not match up to the lack of enthusiasm shown by the government in pushing for the development of this historic site.

Vicky Mallik, another local history enthusiast who has been participating in the excavations, claims that this has been the primary problem in the state's approach towards Rakhigarhi. "It's been nearly 30 years since this site is being dug up, but basic amenities such as a washroom or provision for drinking water have not been looked after," Mallik says. "Apart from building a shed at Mound No. III, no genuine attempt at developing this site has been made by the government. And yet, they proudly hail Rakhigarhi as an iconic world heritage site," he adds.

The skeletal remains of the nearly 4,600-year-old woman—which in recent years stirred up a media storm about the "unbroken continuity" in the genetic make-up of Indians right from the Indus Valley Civilisation—have emerged from Mound No. VII. A mustard field currently surrounds this mound. The site, now closed for public view, has been identified as the burial ground of the ancient people, where



VIKRAM SHARMA

many more such skeletons have been found.

Remains such as these, along with the several other artefacts stored at the temporary structure near Mound I, are supposed to be housed at the Rakhigarhi Indus Valley Civilisation Museum-cum-Interpretation-Centre, located near the excavation sites. However, Mallik says that the construction of this museum-cum-interpretation centre appears to be nowhere near completion.

"Every year, we are told that the museum will be completed in another six months. Ten years have passed like this," he rues. Commissioned in 2014-15, its construction too, ran into multiple hurdles after the CBI enquiry into the fund misappropriation by ASI officials. In 2021, the archaeology and museum department of Haryana recommended changes to the museum structure to "reflect the Indus-Saraswati civilisation". They advised the agency overlooking the museum construction to design the interiors and exteriors of the building according to the brick structures found at the Harappan site.

Reportedly, these recommendations were made "to avoid bringing disrepute to the state" with an ill-conceived architectural plan. While the construction of the museum remains indefinitely stalled, the excavated goods from the

COURTESY: RAKHIGARHI PROJECT

mounds anticipate their fate in battered sacks.

Despite the evident dissatisfaction with the government's lackadaisical approach towards the preservation of this precious heritage, curiously, Mallik is more than willing to accept the narratives that have recently emerged about Rakhigarhi's findings. "I do believe that those living here are our ancestors," he says. He substantiates his confidence in the theory, too. "If you look at the images of the bull in the Indus Valley civilisation artefacts and compare them with the pictures of the cows and bulls around this area, in the Harayana belt, you will find similarities.

Twenty years ago, the way we did agriculture, was very similar in pattern to the ways of the Indus Valley people." He falters a little while drawing on comparisons between the practice of burying the dead among the Harappans and the ritual of cremation in modern-day Hinduism. "You can say, there is a continuity of at least 75 per cent from then to now," Mallik claims. Dharampal too, is not far behind with this affirmation. "The entire settlement at Rakhigarhi has been traced along the Drishadvati river, which was a part of the river Saraswati," he claims. Recent excavations at Mound III have revealed a water reservoir, which is further fuelling the claims of the existence of a drying river that compelled the Harappan people to explore means of water storage. Both Mallik and Dharampal state that their information comes from the ASI reports as well as the conversations among ASI officials that they have overheard in the years they have spent at the site. Stone plaques at the front of each mound, installed by the ASI, back the narrative that is propounded by locals such as these two.

History in Hearsay (Opposite page) Dharampal, a local villager, has been a part of the ASI's excavations at Rakhigarhi; (top) file photo of excavation at Mound No. VI

Many historians, on the other hand, have termed such deductions "hasty" and without any solid grounding in scientific revelations. Their version remains that existing evidence does not support the conflation of the Vedic civilisation with the Harappan civilisation. As historians and archaeologists furiously duel over the material evidences that back their respective claims, the chasm between historical derivations and archaeological findings only seems to deepen with time. Meanwhile, the ruins at Rakhigarhi await their much-deserved preservation and the elusive truth of this millennia-old civilisation continues to remain a casualty.

Samit Das
SPECIALISES IN PAINTING, INTERACTIVE ARTWORKS & ARTISTS' BOOKS

Past Continuum

Archaeological evidence is essential for reconstructing history but history and truth are not static

TEXT & ARTWORK BY SAMIT DAS

Exploring the Void (Opposite page and left) Artworks from the series 'Architecture of Silence', which captures the emerging dialogue between the past and the present

ARCHAEOLOGICAL pieces of evidence are primary resources because they provide direct, tangible links to past human activities even amidst the challenges of destruction and transformation over time. While the soil layers reflect complex processes such as erosion, sedimentation and human activity, archaeologists interpret these transformations and establish relative chronologies using stratigraphy. Scientific techniques such as radiocarbon dating, soil analysis and material studies help refine interpretations and provide temporal accuracy.

Though complicated, the destruction of civilisations often leaves resilient artifacts, architectural remnants, or bio-archaeological traces that serve as windows into past lives. These remnants carry first-hand information about historical communities' technology, economy, social structure and cultural practices. While transformations may obscure some aspects, they also offer insights into environmental changes and human adaptability, making archaeological evidence indispensable for reconstructing history and understanding the continuity and rupture of human civilisations.

The politics of archaeological evidence often remains unsettled as government policies, national agendas and socio-political contexts frequently influence archaeological excavations. What remains on the ground and what has disappeared are critical in shaping historical narratives. Still, the interpretation and prioritisation of archaeological evidence are often subject to political motivations.

Governments often control access to excavation sites and fund projects, making them key players in deciding which aspects of history are highlighted or suppressed. For instance, certain excavations may escalate to reinforce national identity, cultural pride, or territorial claims. But the politics of power may reinterpret the truth as truth itself is a multi-layered word! In contrast, many other layers may disappear if they challenge dominant narratives or expose uncomfortable truths. This selective approach can lead to politicising archaeological evidence and political agendas outlined to serve contemporary interests.

Furthermore, interpretations of archaeological findings are influenced by the biases of researchers, institutions and

the public, leading to contested narratives. The politics of representation—who is explaining the stories and how—is an ongoing debate. As a result, archaeological evidence is not just a static relic of the past but a dynamic and contested tool in creating historiography, deeply intertwined with power structures and ideological frameworks. Technological progress, particularly advancements in digital technology such as photographic imaging systems, has significantly reshaped archaeological theory and our understanding of history.

Reflex Landscape

My visual perspective resonates deeply with the transformative power of archaeological evidence in shaping artistic interpretation. The visual and material remnants of ancient civilisations—monumental architecture, intricate artifacts, or enigmatic symbols—transcend their historical contexts to inspire a profound engagement with the universal human condition. These images and objects often reveal traces of civilisations that grappled with existence, beauty and mortality, sparking contemporary artistic practices that seek meaning beyond the confines of religion or political ideologies.

By invoking a title like 'Architecture of Silence', my work captures the quiet, contemplative dialogue that emerges between the past and the present. It suggests an exploration of the voids left by history, the unspoken, the forgotten and the unknowable. In this silence lies the opportunity to romance with archaeological knowledge, not as a static historical account but as a dynamic source of inspiration that opens new avenues for visual and conceptual art. This approach allows artists to interpret ancient evidence as metaphors for continuity, conflict and coexistence, inviting viewers to meditate on the passage of time and the shared humanity that binds us across eras.

This "new imagery" challenges the reductive narratives of religion or power politics, instead celebrating ambiguity, multiplicity, and reinterpretation. Art inspired by archaeological evidence creates a space where history, memory and imagination converge, allowing us to perceive the past not as distant or silent but as a living, breathing force shaping the present.

Through 'Architecture of Silence', I am not merely representing the echoes of history but creating a new visual language that bridges the temporal and the eternal, the tangible and the abstract. Drawing inspiration from fragments and pieces and tying them together to create 'Drawings from Non-Verbal Mind' is a compelling and meaningful way to collaborate with viewers. By focusing on fragments rather than specific archaeological sites, you invite the audience into a space of imagination and interpretation, where the incomplete and the abstract become tools for personal reflection. This approach transcends literal narratives and encourages viewers to engage intuitively, connecting with my work's emotional and symbolic essence.

My method fosters an open, universal dialogue, allowing viewers to project their experiences, thoughts and emotions onto the artwork. It mirrors the non-linear, fragmented nature of memory and history, creating a shared journey of exploration and discovery. This collaboration is powerful because it relies on the viewer's active participation, making the art not just a visual experience but also a deeply introspective one. By embracing the non-verbal, tapping into a primal, universal language that connects on a level beyond words, making the work timeless and profoundly resonant. Collecting fragments and attempting to reconstruct the past inherently involve a degree of interpretation, often influenced by the politics of knowledge production. Archaeologists, like artists, work with incomplete evidence—pieces and fragments of material culture—and strive to create coherent narratives about past societies. However, interpreting and assembling these fragments are rarely neutral, with contemporary ideologies framing them with funding priorities, institutional frameworks and cultural contexts.

CONSTRUCTING HISTORY FROM FRAGMENTS RAISES QUESTIONS ABOUT AUTHENTICITY AND AUTHORITY. WHOSE VERSION OF THE PAST IS ACCEPTABLE? WHICH VOICES ARE LEFT BEHIND?

Questions of Authenticity and Authority

Constructing history from fragments also raises questions about authenticity and authority. Whose version of the past is acceptable? Which voices are left behind? Transforming fragmented evidence into a linear historical truth can obscure the complexity and multiplicity of past lives and events. These reflexes engage the artistic process in many ways, and we see the new form. However, while my practices celebrate ambiguity and invite open-ended interpretation, archaeology often aims for definitive conclusions that can be contentious and politically charged. For example, deciding which fragments to prioritise, how to contextualise them and which gaps to fill with speculation can significantly shape the "truth" that emerges. These decisions are not merely technical but political, as they often reflect the values and power dynamics of the present. Governments, funding bodies, or dominant cultural groups may influence excavations and interpretations to align with specific agendas—such as reinforcing national pride, validating territorial claims, or marginalising alternative narratives.

By highlighting archaeology and art's fragmentary and interpretive nature, I underscore that history and truth are not static but continuously negotiated and reimagined. This perspective invites viewers to question the constructed nature of historical narratives and engage with the past—and my language of art—in a more critical, reflective and personal way.

(Views expressed are personal)

Astrology and Mental Health: Exploring the Cosmic Connection

Astrologer Sohini Sastri explores planetary influence as a tool for combating mental health issues and empowering individuals

Sohini Sastri, 2 times President Award-winning Astrologer, Life Coach & Philanthropist

The ancient study of astrology, which is concerned with the interpretation of the motions of the heavens, has fascinated people for millennia. Although it cannot take the place of professional mental health care, many individuals discover that astrology provides them with vital insights into their emotional well-being, personality features, and other coping methods. By understanding the cosmic influences on mental health, individuals can achieve greater self-awareness and emotional balance.

Astrological Birth Chart and Emotional Insights:

A person's natal chart shows heavenly bodies at birth. Moon, Mercury, and the 4th house are important for mental and emotional health:

- The Moon represents emotions and subconscious patterns. A well-placed Moon can indicate emotional resilience, while challenging placements may highlight areas of emotional vulnerability.
- Mercury, governing communication and thought processes, reflects mental clarity and adaptability. Adverse aspects can signal anxiety or overthinking tendencies.
- The 4th house, associated with the home and inner self, provides insight into one's emotional foundation and early conditioning.

Planetary Transits and Emotional Fluctuations:

Astrological transits, the current movement of planets, can trigger emotional changes. For example:

- Saturn Return (occurring around ages 29-30 and 58-60) often brings significant life challenges, prompting introspection and personal growth.
- Retrogrades, especially Mercury retrograde, may lead to mental confusion, communication breakdowns, or introspection.

Zodiac Signs and Coping Styles:

Each zodiac sign has unique emotional strengths and challenges:

- Water signs (Cancer, Scorpio, Pisces) are highly intuitive but prone to emotional overwhelm.
- Earth signs (Taurus, Virgo, Capricorn) value stability and may struggle with anxiety when routines are disrupted.
- Air signs (Gemini, Libra, Aquarius) intellectualize emotions, sometimes avoiding deeper feelings.
- Fire signs (Aries, Leo, Sagittarius) thrive on passion but can experience mood swings.

The Impact of Neptune and Escapism:

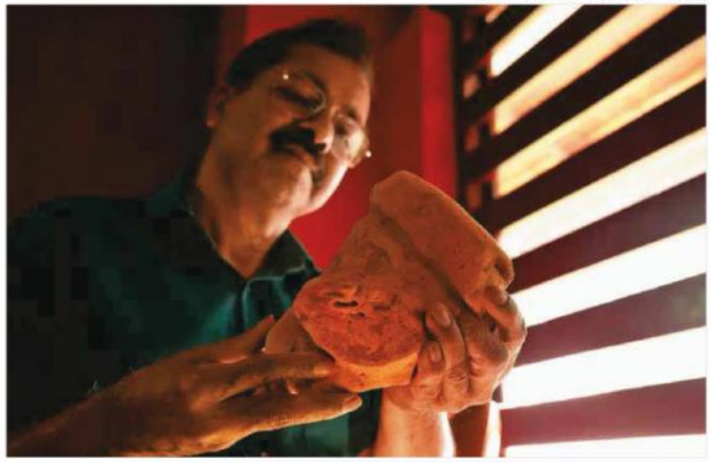
Neptune, the dream and illusion planet, controls the subconscious. Neptune in the natal chart may cause escape, making it hard to face uncomfortable feelings. Over-idealism or disconnection from reality can cause anxiety and uncertainty. Maintaining mental clarity during such moments requires grounding in practical reality.

Astrology as a Tool for Self-Care:

Astrology can supplement mental health treatment but not replace it. Identifying emotional triggers and strengths helps people overcome life's problems. Grounding during Saturn transits can improve mental health.

Astrology offers a reflective lens for exploring mental health, empowering individuals to align their inner world with the cosmos for greater emotional well-being.

PHOTOGRAPHS: TRIBHUVAN TIWARI



A Slice of the Past (Left) Archaeologist K.P. Shajan; (bottom) a file photo of the Pattanam archaeological site; (opposite page) the Kottappuram Fort built by the Portuguese in 1503 AD

The Disagreeables

Though the controversies surrounding Pattanam have put an end to excavation work at the archaeological village in Kerala, the site is still cloaked in secrecy thanks to ASI

COURTESY: KERALA COUNCIL FOR HISTORICAL RESEARCH (KCHR)

Shahina K.K. at Pattanam

SEVENTY-YEAR-OLD Gopi, a daily wage worker in Pattanam, located in Kerala's Ernakulam district, is proud of himself. He believes he has lent a hand to a seminal project that involved discovering the region's past.

When the Pattanam excavations started, Gopi was one of the many manual labourers hired to participate in the grand excavation project undertaken by the Kerala Council for Historical Research (KCHR). Initially, he was a bit suspicious about the project, which was widely discussed by local villagers.

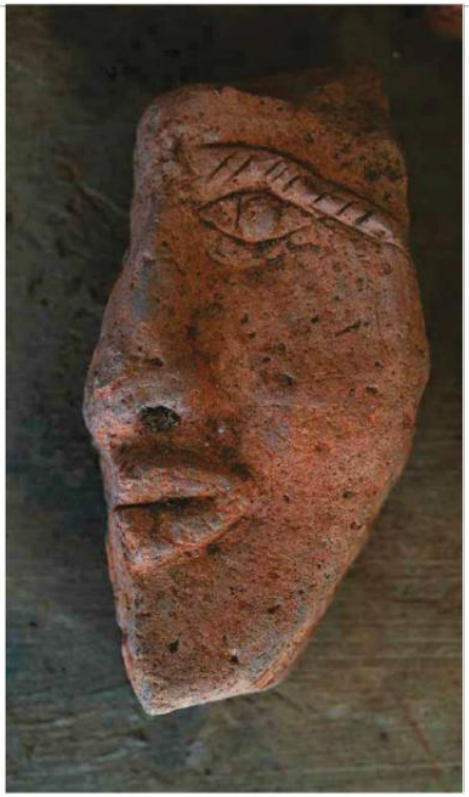
"It was a bit difficult to understand why they have been digging the ground; what is there so important about broken pieces of pots, coins and things like that? Later, I understood that it was such an important process of discovering our own past," says Gopi.

He was told that the excavation aimed to understand the life and systems of the region's ancestors, who lived here centuries ago. However, he is unaware of the ongoing controversies surrounding the Pattanam excavation project. He disagrees with any attempt to communalise the excavation. "If somebody claims this is against the interests of the Hindu community, I totally disagree. This is for everyone. Learning about people who lived here centuries ago is important to all of us," says Gopi, who has only elementary education and works under the Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme.

The excavations at Pattanam, conducted by the KCHR, were halted in 2015 after the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) suspended its excavation license. Hindutva organisations alleged that the project, led by PJ Cherian, aimed to fabricate evidence supporting the claim that St. Thomas, one of Jesus Christ's apostles, arrived in the region. According to popular belief, St. Thomas reached the ancient town of Muziris (present-day Kodungalloor) in AD 52, bringing Christianity to India. Right-wing groups often challenge this claim, citing a lack of archaeological evidence. They have also targeted Cherian, questioning his Christian identity.

From 2007 to 2015, the KCHR conducted nine seasons of excavations at Pattanam, located four km east of the Arabian Sea coast. The site revealed artefacts dating back to 500 BCE, spanning the Iron Age, early historic, medieval and modern periods. The Early Historic period (third century BCE to fifth century CE) seems to be the most active phase of the site.

LOCATED ABOUT 25 KM FROM KOCHI, PATTANAM IS A TYPICAL KERALA LANDSCAPE—AN ORDINARY, LUSH GREEN SEMI-URBAN SETTLEMENT WITH MODERN HOUSES AND DWELLINGS.



Historical Matter (Top) Excavated stones at Pattanam kept outside a church; (right) excavated remains from the archaeological site

Currently, KCHR archaeologists are studying the artefacts, excavated from the location. The trenches are covered for now, following the suspension of the excavation licence and the excavation site is not visible. The project office, a renovated house, displays posters and photographs of the excavation. A museum for the artefacts is also in the making.

Located about 25 km from Kochi, Pattanam is a typical Kerala landscape—an ordinary, lush green semi-urban settlement with modern houses and dwellings. Surrounded by water bodies, it reveals no hint of the hidden treasures and mysteries buried beneath. The KCHR acquired eight acres from individual owners, making it the focus of excavations for nearly a decade.

Glass beads, fragments of broken pottery, pieces of copper and iron and ceramic shards might not seem appealing to the average onlooker. However, these pale, unassuming artefacts uncovered through excavation embody the life and times of an ancient port that dates back 2,000 years.

The site yielded a large number of Roman amphorae, indicating extensive trade relations. These storage jars were primarily used for transporting goods like wine and oil. Evidence of a planned urban settlement was also found, including brick flooring, drainage systems and toilet structures. This suggests that Pattanam was not merely a trading post but a well-organised urban centre. The artefacts reflect a blend of Indian and non-Indian cultures, highlighting Pattanam's role as a multicultural hub during its peak.

According to Cherian, the former Director of KCHR who led the Pattanam excavations, it is entirely possible that Pattanam was, or was part of, the legendary port site known as Muziris. Numerous written records reference this port city, called Muciri Pattinam in the Indian subcontinent and Port Muziris by those in western regions. "If Pattanam was Muziris or Muciri Pattinam, it was part of a broader network of relationships, as no port functioned in isolation.

In his findings, published on multiple platforms, Cherian observes that Pattanam had direct or indirect ties to around 40 other port sites, spanning from South China to Gibraltar, representing an immense level of connectivity. Possibly for the first time in history, individuals from diverse cultures across Asia, Africa, and Europe travelled between these ports. "Within this network, Pattanam appears to have been a key link," suggests Cherian.

However, the explorations and excavations of KCHR could not go on for long. The excavation itself came to a halt in September 2015 after the ASI suspended KCHR's license. This decision was prompted by a complaint from Bharatheeya Vichara Kendram, an affiliate of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which alleged that the project was part of a "collective conspiracy and propaganda to assert that Pattanam was the ancient Muziris."

"The evidence indicating connections with the ancient Roman Empire and an extensive trade network across the Mediterranean region caused displeasure to the Sangh Parivar. The roots of Islam and Christianity that came to ancient India through trade relations are public knowledge, but right-wing groups were worried about the popular perception of St. Thomas, the Apostle of Jesus, being established through excavation and research. In fact, it was too early to draw any conclusions about St. Thomas' presence in Kerala. We speak history based on facts and evidence, not on beliefs and emotions, but they started building a narrative against the excavations at Pattanam," says Thomas Issac, the former finance minister of Kerala.

However, the ASI cited different reasons for cancelling the licence for excavation, ranging from the wrong methodology being applied to financial irregularities. The excavation resumed after Cherian obtained a stay on the order issued by ASI cancelling the Council's licence and continued for a while.

In 2016, the Union Government cancelled the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) licence of KCHR, citing that the organisation had not been involved in charity activities. Soon after, Cherian left KCHR and started his own organisation—PAMA (Paternal and Maternal Ancestry) Institute for the Advancement of Trans-disciplinary Archaeological Sciences. He managed to obtain a licence for excavation and resumed work at Pattanam. However, he could not continue the project for more than a year as his licence was cancelled again by ASI in 2021.

The campaign against the excavations at Pattanam, headed by Cherian under PAMA, intensified with a flood of conspiracy theories frequently carried in right-wing media outlets, such as *Janmabhumi* in Malayalam, an alleged mouthpiece of Hindutva politics. On September 21, 2021, Janmabhumi reported that "the demand to investigate the mysterious connections behind the Pattanam excavation led by Dr PJ Cherian was growing stronger."

THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE SITE SPANS THREE MILLENNIA, FROM CIRCA 1000 BCE, THE EARLY HISTORIC, THE MEDIEVAL AND THE MODERN CULTURAL PERIODS.

According to *Janmabhumi*, "there was a demand to investigate the connections of some people leading the excavations in Kerala and Tamil Nadu with the banned organisation LTTE." The right-wing newspaper also alleged that Cherian's connection with a priest in Tamil Nadu was dubious. According to Janmabhumi, the Catholic priest had connections with LTTE. The newspaper further raised the allegation that the Pattanam excavation was an attempt "to create fake history to promote the Tamil separatist argument in South India."

However, Cherian, while talking to *Outlook*, stated that he does not want to respond to any of these allegations or reopen a closed chapter. Though Cherian bought a piece of land at Pattanam under PAMA and tried to continue the excavation, he could not because of the revoked licence and constant resistance from Parivar organisations.

The excavation at Pattanam was reportedly taken over by ASI after the licence for KCHR had been revoked. The ASI is said to continue the project, but the officials are unwilling to share information with the media. "We have been submitting reports to the government. We cannot share information with the media," says Vijayakumar, the officer in charge of excavations at Pattanam. He also refused to give access to the *Outlook* team to the site or allow them to take photographs.

The eight seasons of excavations by the KCHR have unearthed a large volume and an array of Indian and non-Indian artefacts belonging to different cultures and cultural periods. The chronology of the Pattanam site spans three millennia, from circa 1000 BCE, with evidence of habitation across the Iron Age, the Early Historic, the Medieval and the Modern cultural periods. Based on the material discovered, archaeologists assume that Pattanam was the centre of the ancient Muziris port that existed 2000 years ago.

According to Rajan Gurukkal, a prominent historian and the former Vice Chancellor of the state's Mahatma Gandhi University, Pattanam has uncovered a diverse range of organic and inorganic archaeological artefacts, including wood, plant fibres, spices, vegetables, nuts, beads, bead materials, uncut gemstones and objects made of copper, bronze and iron. Other finds include baked bricks, roof tiles and ceramic fragments, including early Roman pottery.

ARTWORK BY SAAHIL

Sponsored Survey

Increasingly, the potential of archaeology is tragically getting lost as attempts are made to misuse it to address political issues

ARCHAEOLOGY seems to have become a buzzword nowadays. Almost every day, one hears of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) being ordered by various courts to survey mosques. How has this come to be? The ASI is a government body—under the Ministry of Culture—established in the latter half of the 19th century by the British government to look after the archaeological heritage of the colony. The intrinsic nature of the ASI has meant that the primary body responsible for archaeology in India is at the service of the state. Since its origin, the ASI has been a behemoth responsible for conservation, preservation and survey of the major archaeological remains in this country. Thus, any object or building of antique date that is recovered immediately becomes the concern of the ASI and the state. This ownership reminds us of ancient kings claiming everything that was found within their lands: animals, minerals, and resources such as fertile soil and water.

Jaya Menon
HAS TAUGHT ARCHAEOLOGY AT M. S. UNIVERSITY OF BARODA, ALIGARH MUSLIM UNIVERSITY AND SHIV NADAR UNIVERSITY

Unlike other countries where there are cultural resource management bodies that are separate from the government, in India, archaeological remains are regulated by the state, through the ASI. Lately, the ASI has started farming out management of some of the major properties it is responsible for to corporate bodies under its Adopt a Heritage Scheme and has allowed the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) to document, value and conserve unprotected monuments by formulating case-specific guidelines. The ASI's officers also undertake excavations and conduct research, but these tasks are also undertaken by archaeologists in universities and a few trusts and institutions working in the field of heritage. However, since anything to do with heritage is within the purview of the ASI, control over who can excavate a site, how much and how long a site can be excavated is completely in the hands of the ASI. This has also meant that very few practising archaeologists in India or outside have the freedom to speak out about the ASI's archaeological practices and methods.

Moreover, the various arms of the government only recognise the ASI as the legitimate spokesperson for archaeology in India. The honourable judges (both High Court and Supreme Court) in the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi case accepted the ASI's verdict regarding the structure under the mosque, calling the ASI "expert of experts". This has meant an unalloyed acceptance of the work of an organisation that is part of the country's governmental framework. The judiciary, in calling for the ASI to survey and excavate the contested site, has, unfortunately, involved the discipline in the legal case surrounding the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi structure. This has had damaging consequences for both archaeology and the ASI.

The Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi case has subsequently provided a playbook that has been used again and again in different parts of India in the last few months till a stay was put by a bench presided over by the current Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of India. This stay is in place to ascertain the validity of the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, that was enacted to preserve the religious character of places of worship as they were on August 15, 1947. While the Babri Masjid was kept outside the purview of the Act, the implication was that all other places of worship were to maintain *status quo* or the same religious character that they possessed on August 15, 1947. According to the 1991 Act, existing suits that were pending before courts were to abate, and no new suits were to be filed. However, what we have seen in the recent past is the mushrooming of cases, from the Shahi Jama Masjid at Sambhal, the Kamal Maula Mosque at Dhar, and the Jama Masjid at Aligarh to the 13th century Sufi shrine of Khwaja Moin-ud-din Chishti at Ajmer and the Atala Masjid at Jaunpur.

There has been an outcry among historians, archaeologists and the public over the ASI's role in all these disputes, but does the ASI really have a choice but to follow the orders given by the government or the judiciary? The fact that the ASI is in a compromised situation, having to follow government orders, suggests their lack of agency. Ideally, as a government body and that too, at the behest of the state, the ASI should not be excavating, as they do not have the requisite training to carry out cutting-edge research. Its officers have little idea of how far the discipline of archaeology the world over has evolved in the last 75 years, as they continue to practise a kind of archaeology that was taught by Mortimer Wheeler in the late 1940s.

As long as the state remains insecure about the nation's past and selective about its history and heritage, we will continue to find an attempt to assuage past hurt sentiments of a segment of its population, and concentrate on issues that focus on the nation being first, whether it be with the origin of iron metallurgy or the domestication of rice. And it is not just the nation, but regional governments as well are impelling the search for their own histories. The recent focus by the Tamil Nadu government on the findings from Keezhadi and of iron from other sites in the region speaks to a similar desire for primacy, and a contestation with the northern parts of the country.

So, what does one take away from the current situation? One can say that resolution in the Babri Masjid case should not have rested on the involvement of archaeology through the ASI. That opened the space for the ASI to be used for settling historical hurt sentiments of the majority community. As a result of the ASI being dragged into legal cases concerning mosques, the perception among the general public is an instrumentalist one, wherein archaeology is seen to only have this kind of role at the service of the state and the nation. Undoubtedly, excavations that are called for by the state will get public attention, but the discipline has paid a heavy price for what the ASI has been made to do.

However, this is not where the potential of archaeology rests. This country's universities have several able archaeologists working on diverse and complex issues, and archaeology is best left to them. This is a discipline that can bring to light the little people, the unknown crafters, workers, and farmers, the women and children in households, and the vast anonymous numbers who peopled our past villages, towns and cities. This is also a discipline that can explore material, social and political inequalities of access to resources such as land and water as well as the efforts that people made to sustain and conserve them. Archaeology is not just a discipline focusing on the deep past but can speak to more recent historical periods as well as recent and contemporary times, and periods that are exposed to such rapid change that need to be recorded before they are lost. Such archaeologies allow us to combine the material with texts and oral narratives in ways that archaeologists are better equipped to handle. This is the potential of archaeology that is tragically lost in the attempt to misuse it to address political issues.

(Views expressed are personal)

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Circumstantial Evidence

The knowledge produced in India has to be judged by whether it is aimed at dismantling or guarding ignorance

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"On 26th January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics, we will have equality and in social and economic life, we will have inequality. In politics, we will be recognising the principle of one man, one vote and one vote, one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man, one value."

—**B. R. Ambedkar**, on November 25, 1949 in the Constituent Assembly

THE statement of Ambedkar is a challenge to every citizen of the Republic of Indiaand also a stern warning as to how Indians are basically leading a life of contradictions. Contradictions exist and even after *Amrit Kaal* (75 years), they have become stronger both politically and socially. Representation is part of inclusive democracy. However, contradictions existing in social thinking about the nation and nationalism are embedded realities that the citizens are deeply engrossed in guarding. Showcasing the past is also part of safely guarding the interests and going against the inclusive democracy the nation aspires to. These days, the Indic knowledge system is being advocated by the government and a lot of noise is being created around the ideas constantly becoming part of the cultural hegemony of belief in the mythic. The Rational Indic knowledge system does not become part of advocacy. India is a mythic society that believes in its mythic traditions as historical realities. Such a realisation has gone in showcasing museum representations and dissemination of its history by passing archaeological and material culture. The past is not narrated as part of contradictions and conflicts existing in societies, but a glory that needs to be revived in replications, duplications, a perfect mimesis of the spectre of Brahmanical cultural nationalism that emerged since the colonial period and nurtured by the political parties in power impeccably. Thus, the Sanskritic Indic past gets recycled all the time to create a consciousness of senselessness among the masses who are ghettoised by myths. The Constitution of India empowers its citizens to adopt and advocate scientific rationality, but in reality it is systemically bypassed to nurture blind faith and belief systems. For example, a professor of physics gets up in the morning and pours water to the sun despite knowing the fact that water will never reach the sun, a fantastic example of 'protected ignorance'. Thus, knowledge produced in India has to be judged by whether it is aimed at dismantling ignorance or guarding ignorance.

Sanskritists, right from colonial times and revivalism, have a strong belief that their Sanskritic textual tradition is great to an extent in the belief that whatever is described and mentioned in the Vedas is a true testament of the past. In his article published in a book, "India: Historical Beginnings and the Concept of Aryan", Madhav Deshpande elucidated the historiography of Aryans and observed that scholars such as Narayan B Pavagee wrote in his book in Marathi "Bhāratiya Sāmrājya", Volume 2, that Aryans did not come from outside India and further argued that "the Aryans spread across the world from the *Āryāvartic* home and that Sanskrit was the mother of all the languages of the world". The idea of a common Indo-European language became the hallmark of the dissemination of the language itself, bypassing other historical evidence. A well-known archaeologist, S. R. Rao, while delivering lectures on the Lothal script and the decipherment of the Indus script, declared that the Rig Vedic hymns are inscribed on the seals of the Harappan culture. Another example would be the seal depicting the seated human figure surrounded by the animals that gets the nomenclature *"Pashupati Shiva"*, and on the other hand, archaeologist Shubhangana Atre identifies it as female deity in her seminal book "Archetypal Mother: A Systemic Approach to Harappan Religion". But the proposed identification as "female figure" by Atre does not become part of analysis as well as showcasing the seal figurine.

Figurines of Female Deities
A 9th century red sandstone sculpture in Madhya Pradesh

Harappa and Mohenjo-daro have gone to Pakistan, and India has no great Indus site archaeologically as rich as Harappa and Mohenjo-daro. Though many Indus sites

were discovered afterwards in India, mainly in the states of Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Gujarat, the nomenclature of Indus-Sarasvati civilisation gets advocated by R. N. Mishra and S. P. Gupta. The river Sarasvati is supposed to be an important river and in its valley, Harappan sites are located on the Indian side. Nevertheless, we are yet to prove which river is "Sarasvati" in Haryana and Rajasthan. Haryana became a hotbed of archaeological expeditions showcasing the Rig Vedic civilisation. It is an apt example of the politics of representation. How the practise of politics induces the culture of myth in its citizens by advocating "protected ignorance".

The Marxist brand of historians in India claimed that they are the ones who are writing scientific and professional history. The Sanskritists are thickly connected with their *deva-bhasha*. But is there a tacit understanding that exists between the two? Instead of exploring the answer to the question, it should be explored as a riddle. The claimed scientific Marxist historians emphasised on the archaeological evidence and there should be a correlation between the archaeological material and the textual/literary sources. When these Marxists historians write on the ancient past, they do not question the nomenclature of the Vedic Civilisation. A civilisation is generally understood as a state of advancement in its social and cultural developments. Neither do the narratives in the Rig Veda fulfil the criteria nor is there a material culture that will corroborate the same. Despite the absence of archaeological evidence, the Marxists have written on Vedic Civilisation, which basically originates from their own belief or the *mānyatā* (accepted belief). A Sanskritik example would be *"Gitā Rahsya"* by a well-known Brahmin nationalist Lokmanya Tilak. The political party in power had named its made in India DC electric locomotive WCM 5 as "Lokmanya" running on the erstwhile DC section of the Indian Railways in Central Railway's Mumbai division. Both the brands of historians get duly placed by the political outfits of post-independent governments in power. One wonders as to where the archaeological evidence is? Late Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India M. N. Deshpande, in a personal conversation, remarked that the "Rig Veda is a ritualistic text and to excavate history in it is highly problematic". The quest for Vedic Civilisation is a dream project of the caste-Hindus in India directed by the syndrome of Brahmanical cultural nationalism and the homogeneity of tradition. Likewise, the anti-Brahmanical historical reconstruction eulogises king Bali and advocates king Bali as a historical reality. They fail to prove the date or area of rule of king Bali. King Bali is a figure of Vaishnava myth, thus both dwell and argue on mythic tradition.

The origin and development of the language is another case to be looked into. The *mānyatā* has become the biggest guiding principle rather than the hard evidence coming from archaeology. The earliest known example of language in India is Pali and Prakrit recorded in third century BC inscriptions. We do not have any evidence to prove the so-called ancient Sanskrit. Nevertheless, the

THE QUEST FOR VEDIC CIVILISATION IS A DREAM PROJECT OF THE CASTE-HINDUS IN INDIA DIRECTED BY THE SYNDROME OF BRAHMANICAL CULTURAL NATIONALISM AND THE HOMOGENEITY OF TRADITION.

term *cchanda bhashā* is mentioned in the Buddhist text that provides a hint of the existence of some archaic language. Archaeological findings from Tamil Nadu are also busting certain mythic construction of the *āryavarat* (area of north India). Linguistic studies on the Vedas are showing the nature of vocabulary being carried out in the areas of Pakistan and the use of such words by tribes. This aspect is again explained by Deshpande. Therefore, the politics of representation is to be understood from the politics of homogeneity of tradition as well as the power of hegemonic control of the caste-Hindus.

In religious worshiping practices, the textual record existing in the Buddhist text *Chullaniddessa* is an interesting pointer where there is no mention of Shiva and Vishnu, clearly indicating that their worship is a post-Buddhist advocacy. The trampling images are not explained in its historical conflict in the museum narrations. Their narrative assimilations are in tune with what the caste-Hindu mindset would like to read. The mythic as historical reality has generated a euphoria of hate, anger and violence in modern day democracy where the ideal of scientific rationality is totally set aside.

While tracing the religious icons and their developments, all the time, the quest is to relate everything to the Brahmanical tradition as if it was the only reality of the historical past. The surveys in colonial India show that multiple deities were being worshipped by various social groups, including the castes and tribes that had no connections with the Brahmanical religious systems. In medieval Madhya Pradesh, there are several images of female deities found with inscriptions and their names do not become part of the Brahmanical worshiping practices. In order to club them with the Brahmanical system, they are showcased as female divine beings under the umbrella of mother goddess worship of the Brahminical society. And the Sanskritist would like to explore the *sahastranāmstrota* (thousand names) found in various Sanskrit texts. Many Sanskrit texts were also revised during the Mughal times and the colonial times. There are many examples to prove such narratives, and they are still taught as part of *deva-vāni*, the language of the divine. Their representation is motivational to inculcate false pride, a constant process to be part of "protected ignorance".

(Views expressed are personal)

Visionary Achievements

Dr. AV Ramana, Chairman, NMPA, in an interview with Meenakshi Mehta, delves into the key strategies being implemented to address major challenges

With the visionary leader: Dr A.V. Ramana, Chairman, NMPA felicitating Shri Sarbananda Sonowal, Hon'ble Union Minister of Ports, Shipping & Waterways

How do you envision the growth of New Mangalore Port in the next decade, and what key strategies will drive its operational efficiency and competitiveness?

I am glad to share that the Port is completing its 50 years of operation this year. To mark this occasion, we have initiated several developmental projects and technological upgradations. We aim to evolve into a Smart Port by 2030, laying the foundation to become a Mega Port by 2047. Critical infrastructure initiatives include deepening navigation channels to accommodate 18m draft vessels, reconstructing Berth 9 for liquid cargo, and developing Berths 17 and 18 for container and general cargo. By embracing technologies like AI, IoT, 5G and solutions such as digital twin and drone surveillance we aim to streamline operations through real-time monitoring and predictive analytics. Public-Private Partnerships will bring expertise and investment, ensuring financial sustainability and enhancing our competitiveness in the global maritime landscape.

In what ways are you fostering partnerships—with government agencies, private sector players, and the local community—to ensure inclusive and sustainable development?

Dr. A.V. Ramana, Chairman, NMPA

Strong alignment with national programs (PM Gati Shakti, Cruise Bharat, and Harit Sagar guidelines) underpins our development strategy. We actively collaborate with central and state governments for project approvals and effective policy alignment. Under the visionary leadership of Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi and constant monitoring and guidance of Hon'ble Union Minister for Ports, Shipping and Waterways, Shri Sarbananda Sonowal and MoS Shri Shantanu Thakur the Port is making major strides towards becoming a smart Port. Through PPPs, we encourage private investment and operational expertise, transitioning to a Landlord Port Model that empowers terminal operators. Community engagement remains a priority: port-led industrialization creates jobs, while cruise tourism drives local income for drivers, artisans, and merchants. We also support healthcare through an upgraded hospital on PPP basis, provide skill development initiatives, and build infrastructure like the Kulai Fishing Harbour to enhance the livelihood needs of local fishermen communities.

How is NMPA integrating innovative technologies and green practices to address environmental challenges while also fuelling economic growth?

We are a 100% solar-powered port and follow circular economy principles to minimize waste. Advanced automation—ranging from under-vehicle scanning to robotic firefighting—optimizes resource use and lowers emissions. We have deployed electric vehicles, installed charging stations, and upgraded to LED lighting, reflecting our commitment to cleaner operations. By adopting digital twin systems for real-time oversight and predictive maintenance, we would further reduce inefficiencies. Our focus on accommodating larger, more efficient vessels bolsters trade while curbing carbon footprints. Through such technology-driven sustainability, NMPA is setting benchmarks for eco-friendly operations and contributing to Govt. of India's Maritime Vision for 2030 and Maritime Amrit Kaal Vision 2047.

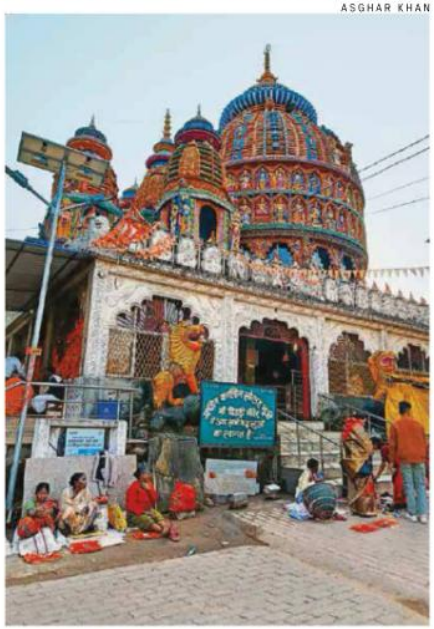
SHUTTERSTOCK

The Stone Goddess

Adivasis and Brahmins stake claim over a deity who was worshipped by tribals as a stone for centuries before the stone became a multi-armed idol of a goddess all Hindus revere

Asghar Khan

ASGHAR KHAN



Contested Claim (Clockwise from top) A man worshipping in a Sarna Sthal during Sarhul Pooja in Jharkhand; The Maa Dewri Mandir in Ranchi

OUTSIDE the main gate of the Maa Dewri temple in a village near Jharkhand capital Ranchi, Muchiram Machua beats the *nagada* (drum) while devotees leaving the sacred premises drop notes of Rs 10 or Rs 20 on a red handkerchief laid out on the floor. "(Former Indian and Chennai Super Kings cricket captain Mahendra Singh) Dhoni was here just two hours ago," says the 45-year-old Muchiram, without letting even a second's pause break the tempo of his drumming. "He is a regular here. He comes here to worship the goddess. We shook hands when he visited 15 years ago." In fact, Dhoni's well-publicised visits have boosted the popularity of the temple like little else could and today visitors from across the country throng the place. "Many come from other parts of the world, too," adds Muchiram. While the flow of devotees has been a blessing to the local businesses, it has also drawn attention to a raging controversy over ownership and belonging that concerns the deity and the temple, as well as matters of faith and indigenous identity.

In its latest iteration, on September 5, 2024, a group of Adivasis had locked the gate to the temple, asking for a meeting where their stance could be heard by the local shopkeepers. The police got the locks opened in a few hours, and following protests by a non-Adivasi Hindu group that demanded action against those who locked the temple, arrested two Adivasi leaders—Purnachandra Munda and Radhakrishna Munda—on September 8. Those who demanded the arrests claim that the land of the temple was registered under the *khatiyan* (land deeds) of 1932 in the name of Chamru Panda, a non-tribal who was then the Brahmin priest of Maa Dewri. The other side—those who locked the gate demanding to be heard—insist this could not be true as the land comes under Schedule V of the Constitution of India, which prohibits ownership of such land by non-tribals. "This is a Schedule V area that comes under the customary land tenure system of the Munda tribe," says Radhakrishna Munda, who was arrested for locking the temple and released on bail a month later. "So, it is just not possible that the land is registered under the name of a non-tribal (Chamru Panda)."

The trail of documentary evidence of ownership is complicated in this case. For example, one report cites a land survey conducted in 1906 to claim that the temple land came under the customary tenure system. The same survey, however, also shows the temple land was registered in the name of Chamru Panda. A subsequent land survey in 1932 mentions only the same name. The local Adivasis question how this land could be registered under a non-tribal name even after the enactment of the Chota Nagpur Tenancy (CNT) Act in 1908, which prohibited the sale of land from tribals to non-tribals.

According to Radhakrishna Munda, the former local king—the King of Tamar—demanded the right to worship in accordance with Hindu practices in 1983-84, after which the local administration allowed Brahmin priests to worship at the temple every Tuesday. "Gradually, the Hindu community dominated the entire temple," he complains. "Instead of Maa Dewri, they began worshipping Goddess Durga. Her idol was built and then the dome above it. This does not reflect the civilisation associated with tribals. It's rather more Hindu." In an interview to a news portal, Sitaram Bari, who was the circle officer of Tamar block in 1984, said the government order allowed the priests to visit the Dewri temple only on Tuesdays, but the number of priests increased over time and they started worshipping along with the Adivasi priests on other days, too.

The temple is 65 km from the highway that connects Ranchi with Jamshedpur and gets its name from Dewri village, which lies between Tamar and Bundu blocks. According to many accounts, the idol is 700 years old and the temple was earlier called 'Dewri diri'. *Diri* means a stone in the Mundari language. "These stones used to be kept inside the temple," says Ramchandra Sahu, a 56-year-old walking among the old stones and rocks strewn all around outside the temple that he came to visit from Gumla, 150 km away. "The small *shivlings* were made later. The temple was much smaller in the past. I have been coming here for 40 years and have seen many things change with the passage of time." He believes the temple belongs to the Hindus and that the tribals are claiming ownership only as the indigenous people of the land.

Locals say there was only one stone in the temple's sanctum until around a hundred years ago. The Adivasis used to worship the stone and their priests were Mundas, whom they called *pahan*. It was only much later—following the order that began the Tuesday worship rituals by Brahmin priests—that the stone was carved into an idol that has 16 arms. While there are seven or eight Brahmin priests today, 22 *pahans* work two shifts at the Dewri temple. "Our number will decrease and the number of Brahmin priests will double in the future," says 32-year-old Mahendra Munda, a *pahan*. Asked why he feels so, Mahendra says, "When my grandfather was young, the priests would come only on Tuesday. Now, their prayers are conducted every day. Even the *pahans* chant Brahmin *shlokas* and *mantras*. We used to worship Dewri Maa as a stone. Now, Durga Maa is being worshipped as an idol. There used to be a sacred grove where tribals used to gather to offer prayers. We used to call this the Sarna. It has all come to an end. We feel the priests will remove all of us (*pahan*) from here on the grounds that as nature worshippers we cannot participate in idol worship."

Mahendra Pahan, a third-generation *pahan* at the temple, rues that the Adivasi stories about the Dewri temple are gradually becoming a thing of the past as those are being presented in a Hindu-ised form. He wants the district administration to present the Adivasi history of the temple in an inscription so that the visitors could know about it. Manoj Panda, a Brahmin priest, dismisses the Adivasi claim over the temple as "imagined". "They call themselves nature worshippers and are against idol worship. So how can they call the temple a Sarna worshipping site?" he asks. "This temple belongs to the 10th century and was built by the king of Tamar. Our ancestors have been worshipping here for four generations." Panda says there are more *pahans* than Brahmin priests because the local tribals have "adopted our way of worshiping and are also making a living by worshipping". "We have no problem with that," he adds.

Jharkhand-based activist and writer Sanjay Basu Mallick argues that the temple has been given a "completely Hindu form" and that it is difficult to convert it back to the traditional mode of worship of the tribals. "When I used to visit the temple with Ram Dayal Munda in 1980-81, there were many stones scattered around the site where the temple has been built now. The local Munda people built the structure of a temple with those scattered stones. Later, the stone image started resembling a woman. From then onwards, the temple started taking shape," he says, adding that many Buddha idols, too, can be found in the area. Padmashree awardee Bulu Imam, who wrote the book *Buddhist Searches in Jharkhand*, also believes this could be likely. "Around 200-300 Buddhist sites in Jharkhand were destroyed," he says.

Mallick suggests that the temple functioning could be handed over to the tribals and their *pahans* so that the community could benefit from the income generated there. Hindu organisations, meanwhile, claim that Sarna—the Adivasi faith based on sacred groves—has been a part of Hinduism. Even a section of Sarna followers have been organising events of idol worship in Jharkhand. In recent decades, idols of the "Sarna goddess" can be seen in Adivasi prayer halls. This change in the mode of worship can be attributed to their growing affinity towards Hinduism. However, Sarna religious leaders still emphasise on doing away with idol worship because, even though nature is like a mother, they don't think worshipping nature in the image of a person is the same as worshipping nature itself.

*(Translated by **Kaveri Mishra**)*

Between the Rock and the File

The Archaeological Survey of India is weighed down by an orthodox and corrupt bureaucracy

Ashish Avikunthak

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FOUNDED in 1861 on the logic of military reconnaissance and colonial surveillance, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) was tasked with searching, discovering, categorising, and enumerating India's vast archaeological heritage encountered by British imperial power. After 1947, the fundamental basis of the organisation remained the same, but it slowly transformed into a gargantuan bureaucratic entity—sluggish and obdurate.

Now, the ASI attempts to protect and preserve the expansive heritage of ancient and medieval India. However, it gets powerful historical and political legitimacy by producing official and governmental knowledge about India's archaeological past, which is the least funded part of its institution. The Comptroller and Auditor General of India report on the ASI in 2015 noted that the budget of the Excavation and Exploration department of the ASI until 2015 was merely one per cent, which has since seen minuscule improvement in the last few years.

The first quarter of the 21st century has not been easy for the ASI. Its epistemological credibility has seen severe erosion after its controversial excavation of Ayodhya in 2003. Although the destruction of the Babri Masjid and the making of the Ram Temple was a political battle for the Hindu fundamentalist and they won, the ASI lost its epistemic legitimacy.

The ASI's methods of excavation have been questioned and debated in India. About 25 years ago, I entered this contested field as an anthropologist of archaeology to study how archaeology as a science is practised in India. This journey led me to the doorstep of one of the largest archaeological bureaucracies in the world—the ASI. I wanted to understand how the ASI produces data, evidence, and facts about India's past. What techniques, methodologies, and practices does it employ? What are the sociological, political, and ideological processes behind its knowledge production mechanisms? How does the ASI conduct excavations and discover artifacts in a trench? I wanted to trace how artifacts found in ASI excavations become published facts and are used as official court evidence.

I found that the process of archaeology in the ASI is shaped by an intricate mix of scientific logic and bureaucratic practices, infused with nationalistic ideologies in India. It grapples with the country's colonial past, an inefficient government machinery, plagued by widespread dissatisfaction among employees. I embedded myself in ASI excavation sites in far-flung corners of India and carefully and exhaustively studied the social, cultural, and scientific world of ASI archaeologists.

The micro-focus of an ASI archaeology is the excavation site. At these sites, artifacts from the ancient and hoary past are discovered, excavated, organised, labelled, catalogued, and presented as scientific objects. Here, ASI archaeology is shaped by an obstinate bureaucratic system where science, state, and religion coalesce together to create the past for India, which is poorly fashioned and weakly articulated.

In the ASI, archaeology isn't really about science, nationalism, or even patriotism. Although ASI members claimed that doing archaeology was for the country, this was merely an excuse for their turgid bureaucratic work. After spending more than two years at excavation sites, ASI offices in Delhi, and different regional centres, I understood that ASI archaeology wasn't just about scientific practices learned from experts. Instead, ASI archaeology was theoretically and functionally an overwhelmingly ideologically driven postcolonial bureaucratic epistemological intervention. It was panoptical, compromised, oppressive, exploitative, and corrupt. The ASI unquestioningly continues to follow methods and ideas from the colonial era, reinforced by an orthodox and corrupt bureaucratic system in modern India.

ASI archaeologists primarily imagine themselves as government bureaucrats in the state's service rather than exemplary or passionate scientists producing authentic and accurate facts about ancient India. Their work is more about following bureaucratic rules than conducting scientific research. This means the practice of archaeology is usurped by a managerial impulse to govern, manage, and regulate, influenced by dogmatic Indian bureaucratic logic.

This system leads to corruption of people, minds, and even the data that the ASI produces. The knowledge they produce is merely a by-product of this bureaucratic system, not its primary objective. Driven by the logic of colonial times, the ASI's organisational system is hierarchical and coercive, making it even more difficult to foster a scientific temperament. Here, an overpowering bureaucracy debilitates archaeological work and the official knowledge it produces.

ASI archaeologists see excavations as an administrative task of aggregating and collecting artifacts to manufacture facts. This process is often impaired and unscrupulous. Through painstaking observation of the nature, quality, content, and extent of ASI excavation sites, I found that the ASI preferred excavating large-scale sites over prolonged periods, sometimes close to a decade. This preference was driven by the potential for siphoning of government funds, rather than addressing specific research problems or the objective of producing factual and verifiable knowledge about India's past.

ASI archaeologists, functioning as bureaucrats, are unconcerned with methodological innovations or the theoretical nuances of archaeological science. They also are indifferent to the knotty historical issues and academic research problems that have plagued India's past. This is evidenced by the fact that official reports of many large-scale excavations, including significant sites like Dholavira and Rakhigarhi conducted more than 20 years ago, have not yet been published. Even the most important excavation conducted by the ASI this century, in Ayodhya in 2003, remains unpublished.

The ASI is a characteristic location to study how the postcolonial Indian government functions. The ASI doesn't operate in areas of extreme tension, such as military zones or regions with high resistance, where the state exerts its brute power, as in Kashmir, Northeast India, and the tribal regions of Chhattisgarh. Instead, ASI excavation sites are calm, stable, and sedate. I found that even here, the Indian state uses its prodigious bureaucratic power to dominate and command the lives of its own personnel involved in the relatively laidback archaeological process, thereby incapacitating the objective of archaeology as a science.

This system controls and manages people's lives, from senior officers to local labourers, much like a factory or military operation and not like an exemplary location of science where knowledge is deeply venerated, honestly created, and sincerely disseminated. The ASI's archaeological work is more about maintaining a tight bureaucratic authority rather than focusing on scientific goals.

The power dynamics and daily oppression seen in ASI archaeology are like those in colonial times, with the same kind of hierarchy and domination. Bureaucracy was an encompassing powerful tool of the colonial empire; after Independence in the ASI, it has evolved as a site of large-scale corruption and ideological misrepresentation.

In this authoritarian system, the local labourers—mostly Dalit, women and the landless—who work the hardest at the excavation site are seen as uneducated and inferior, while the higher-ups, now Indian, have taken the place of the former colonial rulers. This system of regulation and domination is a product of both colonial and postcolonial bureaucratic ideologies, presented as a scientific mission but inherently repressive.

A CAG REPORT ON THE ASI IN 2015 NOTED THAT THE BUDGET OF THE EXCAVATION AND EXPLORATION DEPARTMENT OF THE ASI UNTIL 2015 WAS MERELY ONE PER CENT.

In Independent India, the ASI's archaeological work is a manifestation of this widespread colonial ideology, with its harsh mechanisms still in place and even more perfected. This hegemony affects everyone involved, including the knowledge produced and published by the ASI.

Earlier nationalistic, and now Hindutva, narratives only appear when writing reports or articles, distorting the compromised and undermined knowledge produced by the ASI. This is especially evident in the context of the reports written about the excavation of Harappan sites and most clearly seen in the case of the unpublished Ayodhya excavation report submitted to the Lucknow bench of the Allahabad High Court. The report of this excavation was written in a matter of months when the average time of writing a report of an ASI site takes nearly two decades.

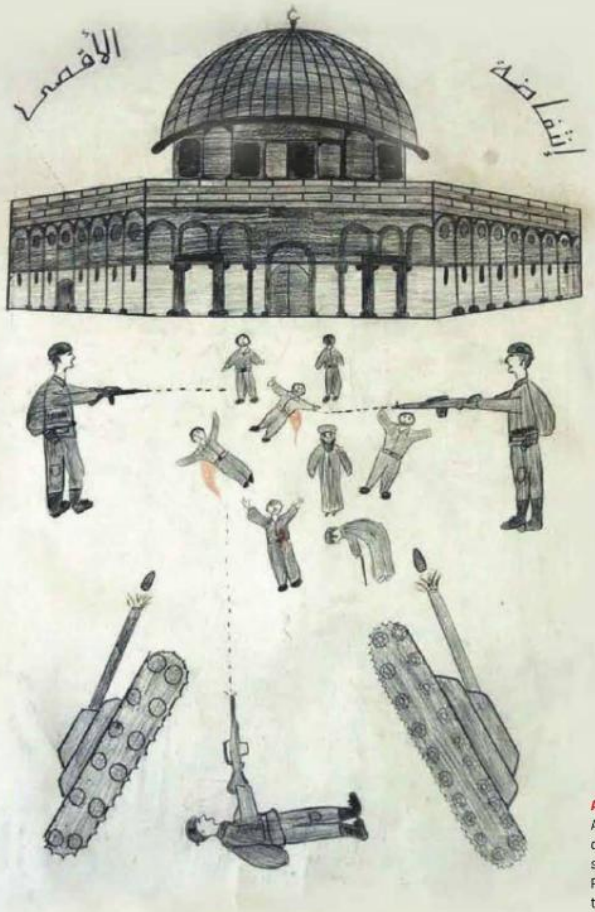
Today, the ASI is being subverted by Hindutva. This is evident in how Hindutva lawyers are repeatedly involved the ASI in numerous mosque-temple disputes, such as those at the Gyanvapi Mosque in Varanasi, the Krishna Janmabhoomi-Shahi Idgah in Mathura, the 13th-century Bhojshala in Dhar, and most recently, the Shahi Jama Masjid in Sambhal. Here, an autocratic bureaucratic system that produces flawed knowledge is exploited by a fundamentalist religious ideology to instigate communal disharmony at Muslim heritage sites. This strategy mirrors what we have seen in the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi dispute.

In ASI archaeology, the past is severely emasculated. Here, facts, knowledge, and dates are sabotaged—in the dusty and forlorn trenches of large-scale horizontal excavation in the margins of India; in the tattered tents of ASI campsites; and in the forged receipts and fabricated bills. This past-making is further compromised in the dumped pottery fragments; faded and obliterated antiquity labels; in the lost and forgotten artifacts stored in the rugged ramparts of medieval forts in Delhi; in the unwritten site reports, never published. In the ASI, corrupt bureaucracy produces corrupt epistemology.

(Views expressed are personal)

Sacred Games

In a divided world, sacred spaces like Al Aqsa and Babri Masjid, which have raised nationalistic fervour, should have endured as symbols of hope, reminding us that while walls and domes may separate, they also unite



Art and Life
A Palestinian child's drawing shows Israeli soldiers shooting Palestinians outside the Al-Aqsa mosque

Iftikhar Gilani
IS A JOURNALIST CURRENTLY BASED IN ANKARA, TÜRKIYE

NESTLED in the bustling heart of Istanbul's Beşiktaş district, the Lala Hayrettin Mosque stands as a mosaic of history's whims. Once a Roman temple, later transforming into a synagogue, then consecutively an Orthodox and a Catholic church before finally embracing its current role as a mosque, this edifice is a chronicle of religious metamorphosis.

Its venerable walls echo the tales of empires risen and fallen, of faiths morphed and merged, encapsulating the profound human journey of spiritual search and expression.

This architectural chameleon is far from being alone in its historical promiscuity. Across continents, sacred sites like the venerable Hagia Sophia and the striking Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba have been repurposed to echo the prevailing winds of religious, political and nationalistic fervour of their epochs.

While some of these sites have become bastions of cultural amalgamation, others, like the contentious Babri Masjid and Jerusalem's tumultuous Al Aqsa Mosque, have sparked fires of debate and discord, igniting the passions of millions.

The Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, a marvel of Byzantine architecture, was once the world's largest cathedral. Built in the sixth century under Emperor Justinian, its majestic dome and intricate mosaics reflected the glory of Eastern Orthodox Christianity.

When Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror captured Constantinople in 1453, Hagia Sophia became a mosque—a decision that established Muslim dominance in Europe and preserved the building's architectural grandeur.

In 1934, the secularist Turkish leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk converted Hagia Sophia into a museum, marking a move toward modernity and neutrality. However, this status quo was upended in 2020, when Turkish courts reinstated its mosque status. For many Turks, the decision represented not just a revival of religious heritage but also a resurgence of national pride rooted in the Ottoman past.

Hagia Sophia's transformation into a mosque became emblematic of Turkey's evolving identity under Recep Tayyip Erdogan's leadership, blending religious revivalism with nationalist aspirations.

Abrahamic Tapestry

But few religious sites have evoked as much emotion and controversy as the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. For Muslims, Al Aqsa holds profound religious significance, being the first qibla in Islam and the site of Prophet Muhammad's Isra and Miraj (Night Journey and Ascension). Spanning 144,000 square metres, it is one of the holiest sites in Islam. However, its history is also steeped in conflict and conquest.

At the heart of Judaism, Christianity and Islam lies a shared foundation of monotheism and a rejection of idol worship. These three major religions trace their origins to the Prophet Abraham (Ibrahim), born in Babylon around 1996 BC during the reign of King Nimrod, in present-day Şanlıurfa, Türkiye, near the Syrian and Iraqi borders. His life, legacy and the narratives surrounding him have profoundly shaped history, culture and religious beliefs across millennia.

Jewish and Islamic traditions recount a legendary confrontation between Nimrod and Abraham in the ancient city of Urfa. Despite opposition, Abraham gained followers, including Princess Sarah, a Babylonian royal whom he married. Guided by divine instruction, Abraham and his followers embarked on a journey to the Promised Land, known as Canaan (modern-day Palestine). Their caravan rested at a colossal rock in Jerusalem, a site that would later become the Dome of the Rock within the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound.

Rabbinic teachings suggest this very rock as the spot from which God created the world and formed Adam from gathered dust. Another tradition places this sacred dust at Mecca, further linking the histories of these Abrahamic faiths.

Palestine's location as a crossroads of Africa, Europe and Asia made it a pivotal hub for trade and a natural destination for prophets spreading divine messages to diverse populations. Yet, even as Abraham and Sarah faced childlessness in their later years, destiny unfolded differently. At Sarah's suggestion, Abraham married Hajira, an Ethiopian slave, who bore him a son, Ismael. Following divine guidance, Abraham left Hajira and their newborn in a desolate desert, today's Mecca.

Amid the barren dunes, a miraculous spring—Zamzam—gushed forth at Ismael's feet, ensuring their survival. This spring remains sacred in Islam, its waters sustaining Mecca for centuries. Ismael grew to become the forefather of the Arab race, and generations later, Prophet Muhammad emerged from his lineage. Abraham returned to Mecca as Ismael matured, and together, they built the Holy Kaaba, establishing the city as a thriving centre of faith and commerce.

Back in Jerusalem, Sarah gave birth to Isaac (Ishaq), who fathered Jacob (Yaqoob). Jacob, also known as Israel, became the patriarch of the 12 Jewish tribes, forging a connection among Jews worldwide as the "sons of Israel". The bond between Arabs and Israelis, descendants of Abraham's sons Ismael and Isaac, mirrors that of stepbrothers. However, the royal lineage through Sarah granted a sense of superiority to the Israelis, a notion Prophet Muhammad addressed in his final sermon, emphasising equality irrespective of race, colour or creed.

Both Jews and Arabs trace their ancestry to Abraham, a descendant of Shem, son of Prophet Noah, making them Semitic peoples. Yet, history is rife with tales of sibling rivalry. Jacob's youngest son, Joseph (Yuusuf), fell victim to his brothers' jealousy, and was sold into slavery in Egypt. However, Joseph rose to power and invited his family to Egypt, providing refuge and stability.

Over time, the power dynamics in Egypt shifted, and the indigenous Coptic community subjugated the Israelites. Under the Pharaoh's oppressive regime, male Israeli infants were drowned in the Nile—a dark chapter in their history. Moses, an infant placed in a basket, was discovered and raised by the Pharaoh's daughter as a Coptic. Moses would later lead the Israelites, receiving divine revelations to craft the Torah and guiding his people back to the Promised Land.

This marked a golden era for Judaism, characterised by rulers

PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

like David and Solomon. King Solomon constructed the First Temple in Jerusalem around 957 BC, with legends suggesting supernatural beings—Djinns—assisted in its construction.

Destruction and Rebuilding of the Temples

However, the Babylonians, harbouring animosity toward Abraham's descendants, led a devastating campaign against Jerusalem under King Nebuchadnezzar II in 586 BC. The city and the First Temple were destroyed, thousands of Jews massacred, and survivors taken as slaves.

The rise of the Persian Empire saw Cyrus the Great liberate the Jews, facilitating their return to Palestine and the rebuilding of the Temple. Later, under Herod the Great, the Second Temple underwent grand expansions, becoming a magnificent structure.

The life and teachings of Jesus brought profound changes to the region. According to Christian tradition, his crucifixion, instigated by certain Jewish factions, led to the persecution of his followers. Seeking refuge, many migrated to Antakya (ancient Antioch) in present-day Türkiye. St. Peter's Grotto in Antakya is believed to be the first Christian house of worship, where followers were first called Christians.

As Christianity spread, the Roman Empire converted and turned against the Jews, holding them responsible for Christ's death. In 70 CE, the Romans, led by Titus, destroyed the Second Temple, banishing Jews from Jerusalem and its surroundings.

Centuries later, during Caliph Umar's reign, Arab armies besieged Jerusalem. In 637 or 638 CE, Patriarch Sophronius surrendered, agreeing to submit only to the Caliph. Umar cleared the ruins of the Temple Mount—then a dumping ground—and established Masjid al-Aqsa. Though an agreement initially barred Jews from residing in Jerusalem, subsequent Muslim rulers did not enforce this restriction.

Jerusalem remained under Arab control until the First Crusade in 1099. Saladin reclaimed the city 90 years later, maintaining Muslim authority until 1967. Today, while Israel controls Jerusalem, Masjid al-Aqsa remains under Jordanian custodianship.

Over two millennia later, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's vow to rebuild the Third Temple on the site of the Al-Aqsa Mosque has reignited tensions between Muslims and Jews amid the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Orthodox Jewish tradition holds that the Third Temple will rise with the arrival of the Messiah.

Netanyahu, however, cites destiny and archaeology, referencing a coin inscribed with "Benjamin" found near Al-Aqsa. His choice of the name Benjamin—adopted after his family's migration from Poland to Israel—adds a personal dimension to his narrative. His original name is Ben Nitay, which he used as late as 1978.

Spain's Córdoba Symbol of Cultural Synthesis

The Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba in Spain's Andalusia stands as a monument to both cultural synthesis and historical rancour. It was constructed as a mosque in 785 by Abd al-Rahman I, founder of the Islamic Emirate of Córdoba.

Over centuries, the mosque's architecture evolved, showcasing the brilliance of Islamic design, with its horseshoe arches and iconic red-and-white striped columns.

When Christian forces captured Córdoba in 1236 during the Reconquista, the mosque was converted into a Catholic cathedral. While modifications were made, the structure's Islamic essence remained. For many years the Mosque-Cathedral was a site of contention, with Muslims yearning for its return to their religious fold.

The suggestion of an exchange between Aya Sofia in Turkiye and the Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba once arose in diplomatic talks between Madrid and Ankara but ultimately failed. For many Muslims, the site's current state is a painful reminder of their Andalusian heritage. Yet, over time, they have largely resigned to its fate, recognising it as an enduring testament to a lost Islamic golden age.

Despite this resignation, the Mosque-Cathedral remains a powerful symbol of religious coexistence. Its ability to encapsulate both Islamic and Christian histories has turned it into a UNESCO World Heritage site and a global tourist attraction.

In stark contrast to Córdoba's resigned acceptance, the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya became a flashpoint of nationalistic fervour and communal violence. Like Hagia Sophia's transition back into a mosque in 2020, it also reflected a broader trend where sacred spaces become symbols of nationalistic pride.

Lahore's Shahid Ganj Gurdwara

In South Asia, interestingly, long before the Babri Masjid dispute arose, another house of worship had become a flashpoint of contention. Lahore's Shahid Ganj mosque-gurdwara dispute in the pre-Partition era turned bloody, claiming the lives of thousands.

Built as a mosque in 1653 during Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan's reign, it was converted into a gurdwara in 1799 after the Sikh army under Maharaja Ranjit Singh captured Lahore.

Tensions erupted as Muslims sought to reclaim the site, but when the matter reached the courts during British rule, the law of limitations was invoked to reject the Muslim claims.

Despite the bloodshed and communal violence in the years that followed, and even after the creation of Pakistan, the decision was never overturned. The Shahid Ganj site continues to function as a gurdwara to this day, a stark contrast to the tumultuous developments surrounding similar disputes.

Lauding Pakistan's decision not to reopen this sensitive chapter, scholars often cite it as a precedent for managing contested religious spaces with a sense of continuity and respect for historical verdicts.

Sacred spaces transcend their role as places of worship, serving as cultural milestones, symbols of authority, and stages for shaping identity. The changes they endure, whether harmonious or marked by conflict, reveal profound insights into the societies that shape them and the eras that birthed them.

These spaces challenge us to ask: can they become bridges rather than battlegrounds?

In a divided world, sacred spaces like Al Aqsa, Babri Masjid, and Hagia Sophia which have raised nationalistic fervour, should have endured as symbols of hope. Far from being mere relics, these sites embody living histories that call for preservation, respect, and a deeper understanding of the lessons of the past. These spaces teach us that unity is not just a possibility—it is a necessity for a better future.

(Views expressed are personal)

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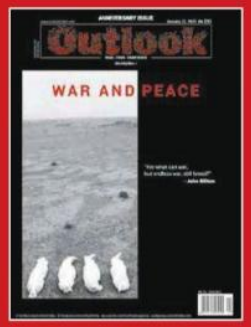

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